WILDER VOICE

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About Us
Founded in 2005, Wilder Voice is Oberlin's publication for creative nonfiction and long-form journalism. You can reach us by email at wvoice@oberlin.edu.

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THE GENDERFUCK ART OF STEPHEN VARBLE:

A CONVERSATION WITH CURATOR DAVID GETSY

NELL BECK

Jimmy DeSana, Untitled (Stephen Varble performing Gutter Art with onlooker), 1975. © Jimmy DeSana Trust.

In 1976, Stephen Varble got out of his limousine and entered Chemical Bank in the West Village of New York to settle a fraudulent withdrawal from his bank account. Wearing a gown of fishing net embellished with sequins and fake dollar-bills, breasts made of condoms filled with cow's blood, and a toy jet-fighter as a codpiece, Varble silently stormed the bank. A cardboard speech bubble that read, "Even though you may be forged - Chemical still banks best!" was suspended over his head. When he was told by the manager that he could not be helped, Varble punctured one of the condoms under his gown, and used the blood that poured from it to write a check for "none million dollars." To applause from the customers, Varble turned towards the door, without saying a word, and exited the bank. He had been wearing only one shoe, to "symbolize his economic loss." He climbed back into the limousine and drove away.

It was almost by accident that David Getsy, OC '95, a professor at the Art Institute of Chicago, stumbled upon the work of Varble while doing research for his upcoming book on a different artist, Scott Burton:

> "I came across an unpublished interview where Burton was talking about the role of sexuality in the arts," Getsy says. "He said one of the most radical artists of the seventies was Stephen Varble. He explained one of these performances where Varble spilled milk at an art gallery out of one of his dresses, and I had just never heard of this person. And I thought I knew my stuff! So I filed it away as a name to pay attention to."

Since his death in 1984, Varble had been largely forgotten by the art world, due in part to his own steadfast rejection of self-promotion and publicity. By the time that Getsy, by then a distinguished professor of art history, had first heard of him, Varble was almost completely wiped from the art world's short memory. In 2011, Getsy was asked by the arts organization Visual AIDS to curate an online gallery of slides, which included photographs of Varble. It was this that finally pushed Getsy to try to answer the question that had been plaguing him: who, really, was Stephen Varble?

Getsy embarked on what would evolve into a years-long project culminating in three exhibitions on the work and history of Varble. Currently, ONE Archives Foundation Gallery in West Hollywood, California, is showing "The Gutter Art of Stephen Varble: Genderqueer Performance in the 1970s, photographs by Greg Day," until May 17.

"Varble himself had never had a museum exhibition," Getsy says. "His last exhibition was over 30 years ago; nothing had been written about him in an art publication since, like, 1977." Instead, much of Varble's work was stored by the people he had shared his life with. Films were stored in closets, photographs in boxes, pieces of costumes in basements; Varble was scattered all over the place.

For Getsy, this unconventional approach to research involving real people rather than collections was both rewarding for his work and a moving personal experience. "What was great about this process was that even though it required a different kind of research practice, it became very much an emotional, a lived practice… more and more people were excited and honored to share their stories and their memories," says Getsy. "It didn't feel like work. It felt like discovery."

Most likely, that is how Varble would have wanted to be remembered. During his lifetime, he was decidedly opposed to any forms of institutionalization or elitism; a steadfast refusal to conform is what drove much of his work. Would Varble have been happy to see his work displayed in galleries now, if he had been so determined to avoid them in the '70s? Perhaps not. But, as Getsy would argue, Varble's work is too meaningful to allow it to be lost. "I think that's the one cautionary tale," Getsy says. "No matter how self-determined, DIY, oppositional, [it's important] to be like, 'What is not just the impact today… but what is the way you think about what the legacy will be of this work? How will it be remembered?" As stirring as it is to deny the legitimacy of institutions, the messages found in Varble's work deserve a platform today. It feels paradoxical to try to honor an artist who so firmly denied recognition of any sort; yet if Varble preferred anonymity and oppositionality in his life, the significance of his work now reaches beyond that.

Stephen Varble was born in Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1946 to a staunchly Christian family. Growing up, he was a choirboy. Varble's upbringing instilled a deep sense of religiosity in him, one that would carry him through much of his work in his adult life. "My parents wanted me to be a missionary," he once said, "but I became a monster instead."

While studying English at the University of Kentucky, Varble immersed himself in Lexington's LGBT scene by joining the Pagan Babies, a queer theater group. He moved to New York in 1969, and received an MFA in directing from Columbia University in 1971.

Varble soon began to move into the world of 1970s New York performance art, particularly through his burgeoning romantic and collaborative relationship with the influential Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks. It was this relationship, as well as inspiration he found in the groundbreaking work of the filmmaker Jack Smith, that allowed Varble to establish himself as a major figure of seventies queer art.

Varble's work revolved around disruption and garbage. He constantly placed himself in spaces where he was not welcome, and was an outright challenger of gender binaries, capitalist structures, and the elitism of the art world. He only grew more radical with time. Hendricks largely influenced Varble's transition from film to theater and performance art. One of the earliest examples of this evolution is seen in Varble's "Blind Walks;" dressed in all-white and walking blindfolded through the streets of New York, Varble would blast Stevie Wonder songs from a cassette tape recorder and carry a blank board strapped to his arm, Jesus-like. Moving through the city without sight put Varble in an incredibly vulnerable position - yet this was only the beginning of a long career of fearless disruption.

Varble and Hendricks split in September of 1974. Following the break up, Varble developed a female alter-ego whom he dubbed Marie Debris; she would come out not only in staged performances, but also at dinner parties. In this genderqueer costume, usually composed of pieces of trash and everyday items such as chicken bones, pipe cleaners, and milk cartons, he would parade the streets of New York performing

various forms of public interventions. For his series Costume Tours of New York, Varble, dressed in his brazen ensembles, led spontaneous and unauthorized gallery tours in SoHo for anyone who wished to join. These tours, like many of his performances, were largely wordless except for cooing and clicking sounds. It was a flamboyant mockery of wealth and class pretensions, as well as commentary on the blurred lines of gender identity.

Varble's disgust with the classism and celebrity that he saw pervading the New York art scene only grew as he began to gain more recognition against his will. It was inevitable that, no matter how much he challenged the system, the system would eventually conform itself to embrace him, thereby taking away from the message he was trying to send about the perils of hierarchy. Yet Varble managed to deride the recognition he was gaining. He had only one gallery show during his lifetime, which he sabotaged brilliantly. By titling it "The Awful Art Show" and forcing the gallery to price each piece outrageously high so as to prevent anyone from buying anything, he assured the failure of his own exhibit.

But the attention didn't abate. Varble felt his work was being more and more restrained by it all. "He became increasingly frustrated with how much the most radical actions or the most fantastical costumes would still be absorbed by the art world, by the art institution," Getsy says. "This is the story of not just Varble, but all institutional critique and oppositional art. It's built into the narrative of progress that contemporary art defines itself through… absorb[ing] its challenges as part of its reason for being."

In 1977, Varble retreated from the spotlight, in part in reaction to the newfound attention, but also because he met his last partner Daniel Cahill, a married merchant marine. "Cahill helped reactivate the religiosity that had been part of Varble's worldview since he was a teenager," Getsy says. "It really enabled him… And actually the most strident anti-capitalist statements all come from this moment when he's re-embracing the idea of a spiritual mission of salvation from late capitalism." During these years, Varble was producing plenty of work—as well as being a performance artist, Varble was a novelist, playwright, and filmmaker—but he focused mostly on video, returning to the medium that had captured him early on, before first meeting Hendricks and falling into the performance world of Fluxus art. But in the midst of making his epic movie, "Journey to the Sun," Varble got AIDS. With the film unfinished, he died on January 6, 1984, in Lenox Hill Hospital.

In early March of this year, HIV was cured in a man referred to as the London patient, the second such case since the global epidemic began decades ago. Nearly twelve years previously, one other person had been cured of the virus that causes AIDS. The Berlin patient, who has since been identified as Timothy Ray Brown, 52, now lives in Palm Springs, California.

Both men were also diagnosed with cancer, for which they received bone marrow transplants, and it was those transplants that ended up containing a mutation resistant to HIV. The success of the most recent case of the London patient has inspired a newfound hope that a cure for AIDS could be discovered in the near future.

The impact of the AIDS crisis on the art world was monumental. Many artists were lost far too early, but the epidemic led to the production of incredibly powerful and politically influential work. Some more well-known examples might be the AIDS logo series by the collective General Idea, or Felix Gonzalez-Torres' slowly disappearing pile of candy, which symbolizes the loss of his partner. Today there are many artists, such as Kia LaBeija and Jonathan Molina-Garcia, who are still working to fight HIV/AIDS through their work.

Following his own death of AIDS, the crisis of the 1980s and nineties swallowed Varble's work of gender nonconformity and replaced it with national fear-mongering and homophobia. To preserve Varble's queer art, hidden by history, Getsy had to divert from traditional forms of research; he needed to connect with people rather than databases, friends rather than institutions. Because Varble was so opposed to museum or gallery collections, what saved Varble's work were intimate connections more than anything else, a valuable, but fleeting, mode of conservation. Through Getsy, this memorialization was honored and then expanded upon through the current exhibitions. Getsy talked to Hendricks, Varble's partner when he first moved to New York, along with a plethora of others who had, in some way or another, shared a relationship with Varble. "That was what was exciting about it," Getsy says. "To realize that it was all there, and it was held by his network of friends."

Varble's work comments on many of the concerns that still resonate today—anxiety around late capitalism and the false and restrictive nature of gender binaries. As Getsy says, what Varble—an outcast, a queer man who lived and died during the AIDS crisis—did so well was to take what culture has "devalued or… discarded, and reclaim it and love it and give it value… I think that's the big relevance."

Varble's story is one of genderfuck, of oppression, of the power that comes from radical self-expression, and of the injustice of the AIDS crisis. Getsy's work in reviving and curating Varble's work brings to mainstream conversation topics that were once only found in the corners of society. Varble's gender nonconformity and his embrace of the trashy and the crude are today at center stage, and it is Getsy who is encouraging us to confront that. And as other 1970s guerilla artists and performers, like the Cockettes, Lorraine O'Grady, and Hunter Reynolds, are also being rediscovered by today's generation, Varble now seems to fit right in. •

Varble in the "Demonstration Costume With Only One Shoe" for the "Chemical Bank Protest," 1976. Credit © Greg Day

THE CURANDERO

ADRIANA TEITELBAUM

Image by Mikeala Fishman

The story always starts the same way, with the curandero—our nameless, mythical, ancestral patriarch. We wouldn't have a story at all without him. Since his time we have forgotten his name and precisely where he came from, but we haven't forgotten him. Our nameless, mythical, ancestral patriarch. Our curandero was a slave. We don't know exactly where, some unspecified francophone Caribbean island. Legend has it that during a particularly brutal hurricane season, the mistress of the plantation went to visit the slave quarters in the middle of the night, seeking his help. See, her son had gotten sick, and the European doctors and the medicines they brought with them to this nameless island had done nothing to heal him. The mistress had heard tales of our curandero, how he used herbs and natural remedies to cure those on the brink of death. And so she came to him with an ultimatum: Heal my son, and I will make my husband give you your freedom. And so our curandero complied, assuring the mistress that he could indeed heal her son. He warned her, however, that before her son got better, he would get much, much worse. She was skeptical, but desperate, and so our curandero began the healing process. And just as predicted, the master's son got much, much worse. Until he got better. Our curandero fulfilled his half of the deal, and so the mistress fulfilled hers. He was given his freedom papers and soon after boarded a ship to a little neighboring island. But, like all stories of legacy and magic, ours does not have such a happy ending. Freedom does not come that easily. Our story includes another slave, a brujo, who sought vengeance against our curandero. He was jealous that this opportunity for freedom had passed him by, and so he cursed our curandero so that no matter how far he moved or how long he lived, he and all of his descendants would not and could not ever be truly free.

I can't remember the first time I heard this story. I have different floating memories of it being told by my mother and my abuelo as a little kid and as a teenager. Arguing over the details with my siblings and cousins. Sometimes in English, sometimes in Spanish. But no matter how hard I try, I cannot find the moment in which I first heard it. But it has always been around. Lingering in the shadows with its vague setting and nameless characters. The longer I exist with it, the more desperate I am to know every detail—any detail—that could give me a better chance of understanding myself, my family, and our past. My mother tells me that the majority of the story was lost with the passing of her grandmother's generation. My bisabuela is often thought of as the last in that line of magic. I never met her. We like to say her ghost still remains at my abuelo's house in Puerto Rico, playing pranks on her visiting great grandchildren whenever we're around. But I don't know if I believe she's really there. Like most things about our past and our history, I don't really know what happened. No one does.

The supposed manifestation of our curse is said to happen as we start to age, with the slow losing of the mind. And while we can point to certain elderly relatives whose minds and memories faded with old age, that seems to be more a fact of nature than of magic. So I've found myself wondering if maybe the curse looks like something else. I think my abuelo must have felt cursed the day he broke his back in a factory accident, leaving him out of work for months. My mother must have felt cursed that same day when her father was brought home in the back of a pickup truck, unable to move. And there are other things, terrible things, private things that are not mine to write down that have happened to descendants of our curandero, that could theoretically be explained by an almost ancient, freedom-depriving curse.

But none of this is anything out of the ordinary. This is not to say the story isn't extraordinary. It's to say that we are not the only family with a curse. One that is missing a few details; something special and old that's fraying at the edges. If you look broadly at Latinx and Caribbean oral histories, you'll find a lot of magic. Brujería, Obeah, Santería, Quimbanda. And within that magic, you'll also find a lot of curses. It's no wonder that a peoples who have been so brutally conquered and colonized would find themselves feeling powerless to circumstance. If you peel back the layers of who has been cursed and how, the pieces will fall together to reveal what looks a lot like colonialism. That root of all evil. El mal de ojo verdadero. Poverty, violence, intergenerational trauma. In our elite circles of scholarship and academia, these phenomena are pointed to as the consequences faced by the colonized subject. Sometimes I find myself thinking that our curse is a just story someone made up to explain why all this shitty stuff keeps happening. But I don't like thinking that. It feels too simple. The curandero has always been nameless, and faceless, ambiguously floating in time and space. But I've always known him, and always felt so grateful to know that a part of me comes from him. I don't want to let go of him, or that history, just for an answer I can easily wrap my head around.

So where does that leave me? Some unknown number of generations later, a privileged girl at a prestigious American college, who probably smokes too much weed and whose biggest daily concern is her hair. Am I cursed? Am I doomed to go crazy with old age, to be kept from freedom by a curse put on some ancestor whom I can't even name? Or am I so far removed, such a watered-down norteamericana gringa, that I have escaped it's elusive, mythical clutches? Is that freedom? Is it my generation that is truly, finally free? When I ask myself these questions I can't help but notice that I start to sound like I want to be cursed. As if telling myself that I really am damned by maldicíon will reaffirm an identity that so frequently slips away from me. That feels selfish.

But I'm trying not to be so hard on myself anymore. To not blame myself for where I exist. To be grateful for the sacrifices others have made to get me where I am. I know I cannot be the only one trapped by this long, mysterious history. And if there is one truth to our cursed story, it's that our lineage did not stay in one location for long. We weren't allowed to. All that movement must have at some point felt like being lost. So maybe it makes sense that in all that time, across islands and oceans and continents, there really was a curse and it really did just disappear into the chaos. That doesn't have to mean that I can't look at this story as a history. A placeless, nameless, faceless ancestry I can locate myself within. Or at least a part of myself. Amongst countless moving pieces, some of which I have no knowledge, it is reassuring to have this story be a constant. An old world. A beginning.

The idea of an ancestral homeland, a connection to a land that is older than time, is something those lost in diasporas tend to yearn for. It may be fair to say we even romanticize the concept. Junot Díaz once called it a "longing for elsewheres." Looking at my family's history, it makes sense why homeland for us is not so easy to identify. What is Puerto Rico to me, a broken tongued girl who was raised in North Jersey. What was some other nameless Caribbean island to my mother and her siblings, when their own Puerto Rico was an ambiguous mix of white and black, of Estados Unidos and the Caribbean? When their home so frequently moved from island to mainland and back again. At that point, it must become difficult to recognize what is temporary and what is permanent. And what came before that? Official history tells me it must have been the colonizers land mixed with somewhere in Africa. But these nameless places have little meaning to me. So whether or not the story is fact or fiction, magic or nature, a blend of all or none, it is a graspable homeland, one that cannot be taken away by anyone else.

And of course, it has always been an oral history. Passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Over dinners and at parties, late at night and into the early morning. This way it is owned by all and by none. This is exactly why I wanted to write this piece. It is also exactly why I did not want to write this piece. It is the reason I write it warily now, carving this legacy into a physicality, unsure of whether

or not it is mine to put onto paper at all. What does it mean for me to be writing about it? Who am I writing it for anyways? I'd like to say it's just for myself. Or for my forgotten ancestors, the ones who did not have access to these privileges that rest at my fingertips. Maybe I am writing this for my mother, but I know she has strength enough beyond my words. Part of me fears that I am writing for my peers. As if I have something to prove to the white, wealthy elite that surrounds me. As if my worth lies in my ability to come from as much pain and loss as possible, and as if this story proves it to them. Maybe, in the midst of my desperation to find stability, I have tokenized myself as an emblem of diversity to ease someone else's guilt.

The closer I think I get to an answer, the more questions I find hiding along this self-reflective path. It is hard to keep track of so much namelessness. It's even harder to say if I can call it mine. I know I am not done trying to figure out my place amongst this mess of magic and diaspora. I probably never will be. Maybe thinking of it in terms of ownership is too black and white– too stuck in a binary to be true one way or the other. I know that to say the story is not mine, to ignore that part of my biological ancestry is a lie. And to say that it is all I am would also be a lie.

In the very unique, very specific trajectory of my life thus far, our curandero and his story have served a special purpose. And I'm sure that for others—family members I know along with the ones who have been estranged by time and circumstance—this precious story, this terrible curse, has had a different role in their lives. So maybe that's why we have it. Why it has become a sort of non-material, moveable homeland. It allows us, who feel like we belong to nothing, to feel as if we belong to something. It allows our home to mean more than place. I wish I could end with more concrete answers to all my questions, or with something beautiful about legacy and family and meaning. But answers are not always so static. Sometimes they ebb and flow, migrating across land and water like people.•

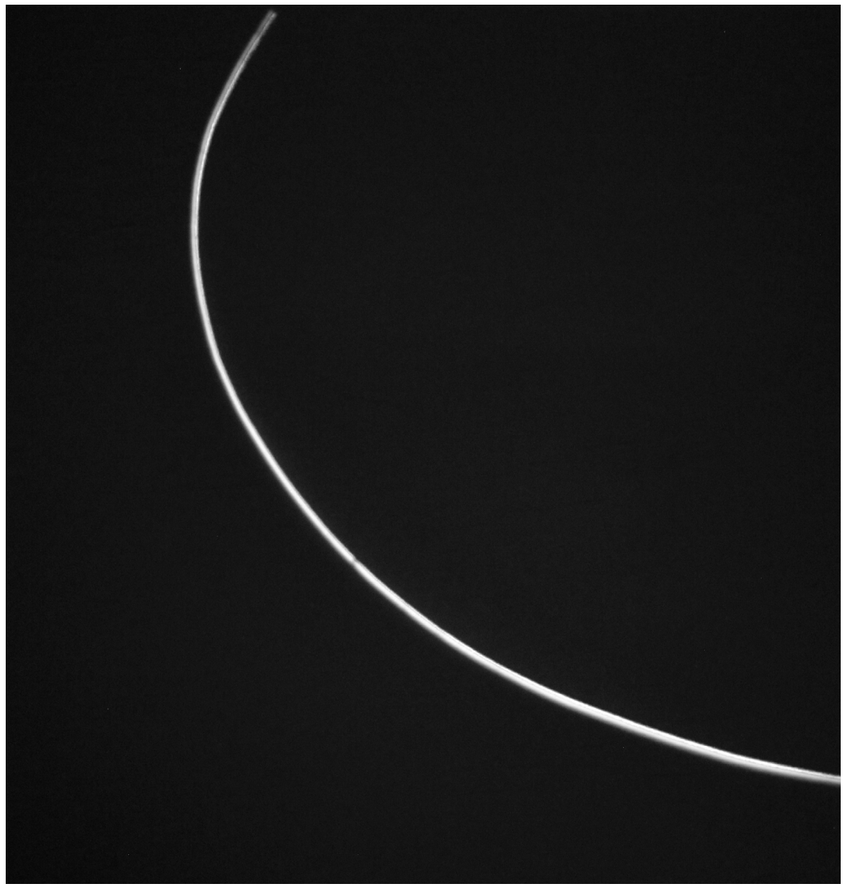


Image by Amanda Poorvu

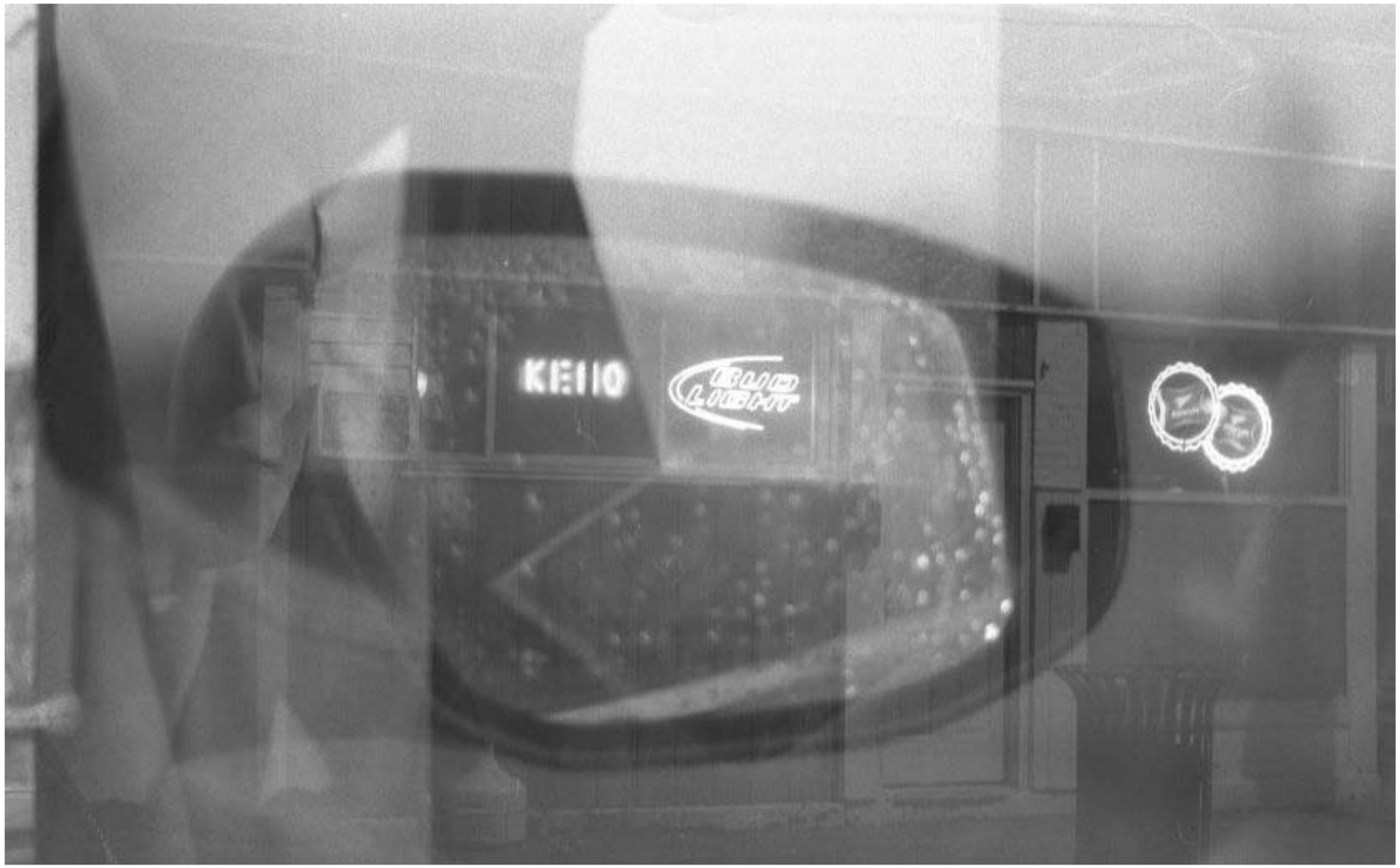


Image by Bridget Conway

GRACE MCALLISTER

5:15 MONDAY MORNING

1010 WINS makes me sicker in a tunnel, canned voices grate
the same way as the too-fast orange lights.

My dad drives in quiet sympathy.
Everything seems too fast and too slow at once

Or not too slow, but too fast and too empty,
Like leaving town gives every detail an unearned gravity

Which makes the face of each passing building so overwhelmingly rich
That I know I'll remember none of it.

Before dawn, the whole world gleams
like wet pavement, and every light is the diluted reflection of a light

All weak and watery •

ODE TO EVE

Gin and ginger ale in hand and
on the worst night of my life,
Eve awarded me my jacket and charged
her marines boyfriend with taking
me home.

Eve is making potato leek soup,
the scales of justice dangling
from her ladle hand as she asks
me to grab the wine from the fridge
please.

We're at a hotel party
some misguided boy urged her to come to
in his own style of low-effort seduction.
We're at the McDonald's on New Year's,
sipping soda through the too-wide straws.

We're shivering on Brighton Beach
blue white legs prematurely in shorts,
sunlight deceptively cold as we weigh
down our blanket with our full backpacks.•

THE SECOND SEX

A TRANSLATION OF "LE DEUXIÉME SEXE" BY SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

JULIA PETERSON

Translator's Note:

Why keep reading (and translating) *The Second Sex*?

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, a massively significant early second-wave feminist book, turned 70 years old this year. As I have worked closely with this text over the last two years, I have become very aware of all the ways that this text shows its age, from its eager explorations of ideas that feminists have largely discarded or moved beyond to language that we would no longer use today. I am also a strong believer in reexamining the literary canon – just because something was once significant does not mean that it is still important for us to study it, and remaining married to the texts that we were taught or what our teachers were taught means that other, perhaps more worthy texts are left off the syllabus. That said, I think that *The Second Sex* remains a text that should be read, studied, and re-translated by contemporary and future feminists, largely because of the way I have come to believe that it is structured to require reader interaction.

Five years ago, I was introduced to *The Second Sex* in a French class that I was taking back in my home province of Quebec – it was my first exposure to feminism in an academic context, and I was enthralled. Since then, especially as I have immersed myself in this work from a translator's perspective, my ideas on how this book should be read have evolved.

First, I have learned that *The Second Sex* is so much more fun than I gave it credit for, five years ago. Back then, I was trying to read it as just another dry academic text, but that does not do justice to the joyful tumult of lavish literary prose that de Beauvoir wove through her academic arguments. She was not just curating information about feminism in an ordered list; I have found that her prose revels in the moment between proven fact and extrapolated conclusion. The life cycle of an ant becomes high tragedy, the history of pervasive societal myths become poetry, and the authors of sexist arguments become the targets of her laser-guided snark.

I have also come to believe that *The Second Sex* is not trying to definitively answer the question of 'what is a woman?' – if de Beauvoir had thought she had the answer, I don't think she would have buried it in a 700-page text. Instead, I think that this book is a debate looking for a debate partner. In two volumes, de Beauvoir presents all the information she could find relating to women and essentially invites readers to go to town, to push back on her weaker claims and cut away the dross until only the most valuable arguments remain.

For me, this is why this book remains so worthy of study and translation, and I think will remain so for a very long time; because we are invited to bring our whole selves to this debate. I read and translate *The Second Sex* as a Jewish woman, a queer woman, a young woman, an Oberlin student, and all of these aspects of who I am are engaged in my interactions with this text. When it comes to the marriage between this text and its readers, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and I believe that this 70-year-old text can still be a valuable tool in helping us shape the feminism of the future.

Image by Bridget Conway

J'ai longtemps hésité à écrire un livre sur la femme. Le sujet est irritant, surtout pour les femmes ; et il n'est pas neuf. La querelle du féminisme a fait couler assez d'encre, à présent elle est à peu près close : n'en parlons plus. On en parle encore cependant. Et il ne semble pas que les volumineuses sottises débitées pendant ce dernier siècle aient beaucoup éclairé le problème. D'ailleurs y a-t-il un problème ? Et quel est-il ? Y a-t-il même des femmes ? Certes la théorie de l'éternel féminin compte encore des adeptes ; ils chuchotent : « Même en Russie, *elles* restent bien femmes » ; mais d'autres gens bien informés – et les mêmes aussi quelquefois – soupirent : « La femme se perd, la femme est perdue. » On ne sait plus bien s'il existe encore des femmes, s'il en existera toujours, s'il faut ou non le souhaiter, quelle place elles occupent en ce monde, quelle place elles devraient y occuper. « Où sont les femmes ? » demandait récemment un magazine intermittent1. Mais d'abord : qu'est-ce qu'une femme ? « *Tota mulier in utero* : c'est une matrice », dit l'un. Cependant parlant de certaines femmes, les connaisseurs décrètent : « Ce ne sont pas des femmes » bien qu'elles aient un utérus comme les autres. Tout le monde s'accorde à reconnaître qu'il y a dans l'espèce humaine des femelles ; elles constituent aujourd'hui comme autrefois à peu près la moitié de l'humanité ; et pourtant on nous dit que « la féminité est en péril » ; on nous exhorte : « Soyez femmes, restez femmes, devenez femmes. » Tout être humain femelle n'est donc pas nécessairement une femme ; il lui faut participer de cette réalité mystérieuse et menacée qu'est la féminité. Celle-ci est-elle sécrétée par les ovaires ? ou figée au fond d'un ciel platonicien ? Suffit-il d'un jupon à frou-frou pour la faire descendre sur terre ? Bien que certaines femmes s'efforcent avec zèle de l'incarner, le modèle n'en a jamais été déposé. On la décrit volontiers en termes vagues et miroitants qui semblent empruntés au vocabulaire des voyantes. Au temps de saint Thomas, elle apparaissait comme une essence aussi sûrement définie que la vertu dormitive du pavot. Mais le conceptualisme a perdu du terrain : les sciences biologiques et sociales ne croient plus en l'existence d'entités immuablement fixées qui définiraient des caractères donnés tels que ceux de la Femme, du Juif ou du Noir ; elles considèrent le caractère comme une réaction secondaire à une *situation*. S'il n'y a plus aujourd'hui de féminité, c'est qu'il n'y en a jamais eu. Cela signifie-t-il que le mot « femme » n'ait aucun contenu ? C'est ce qu'affirment vigoureusement les partisans

I have long hesitated to write a book about women. The subject is irritating, especially for women, and it is not new. Enough ink has been spilled on the topic of feminism and the discussion is nearly exhausted: let's stop talking about it. Yet we continue to talk. It seems that the large amount of arrant nonsense produced during the last century has not shed much light on the problem. And — is there a problem? What is it? Are there even women? Certainly, the theory of the eternal feminine still has followers; they whisper, "Even in Russia, women are still women"; but other well-informed people — sometimes the same people — sigh that: "women are losing their way, women are lost". We don't know if any women still exist, if women will always exist, whether we should wish for their existence or not, what place they occupy in the world, or what place they ought to occupy. A periodical recently asked "Where are the women?" But first: what is a woman? "*Tota mulier in utero*: she is an incubator, one might say. However, when speaking about certain females, people decree that "they are not women", though they have a uterus like the others. Everybody can agree that there exist females of the human species; today, like in the past, they constitute approximately half the human population; and still we are told that "femininity is in peril" and we are urged to "be women, stay women, become women". Therefore, a female human is not necessarily a woman: she must participate in this mysterious and threatened reality that is femininity. Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Does it fall out of a platonic sky? Is a frilly skirt enough to conjure it up? Although some women work zealously to embody it, the model has never been precisely defined. We willingly describe womanhood in vague and shimmery terms that seem to have been borrowed from the language of prophecy. In the time of Saint Thomas, femininity appeared to be an essence as clearly defined as the soporific effects of the poppy. But conceptualism has been losing ground: biological and social sciences no longer believe that there exist immutably fixed traits that define the *essential character* of people such as women, Jews and Blacks; they consider character to be a secondary reaction to a *situation*. If there is no femininity today, it's that there never was. Does this mean that the word "woman" is meaningless? This belief is strongly championed by the enlightenment philosophers, the rationalists, and the nominalists: that women are simply those humans to which we have arbitrarily applied

tisans de la philosophie des lumières, du rationalisme, du nominalisme : les femmes seraient seulement parmi les êtres humains ceux qu'on désigne arbitrairement par le mot « femme » ; en particulier les Américaines pensent volontiers que la femme en tant que telle n'a plus lieu ; si une attardée se prend encore pour une femme, ses amies lui conseillent de se faire psychanalyser afin de se délivrer de cette obsession. À propos d'un ouvrage, d'ailleurs fort agaçant, intitulé *Modem Woman* : *a lost sex*, Dorothy Parker a écrit : « Je ne peux être juste pour les livres qui traitent de la femme en tant que femme... Mon idée c'est que tous, aussi bien hommes que femmes, qui que nous soyons, nous devons être considérés comme des êtres humains. » Mais le nominalisme est une doctrine un peu courte ; et les antiféministes ont beau jeu de montrer que les femmes ne *sont* pas des hommes. Assurément la femme est comme l'homme un être humain : mais une telle affirmation est abstraite ; le fait est que tout être humain concret est toujours singulièrement situé. Refuser les notions d'éternel féminin, d'âme noire, de caractère juif, ce n'est pas nier qu'il y ait aujourd'hui des Juifs, des Noirs, des femmes : cette négation ne représente pas pour les intéressés une libération, mais une fuite inauthentique. Il est clair qu'aucune femme ne peut prétendre sans mauvaise foi se situer par-delà son sexe. Une femme écrivain connue a refusé voici quelques années de laisser paraître son portrait dans une série de photographies consacrées précisément aux femmes écrivains : elle voulait être rangée parmi les hommes ; mais pour obtenir ce privilège, elle utilisa l'influence de son mari. Les femmes qui affirment qu'elles sont des hommes n'en réclament pas moins des égards et des hommages masculins. Je me rappelle aussi cette jeune trotskiste debout sur une estrade au milieu d'un meeting houleux et qui s'apprêtait à faire le coup de poing malgré son évidente fragilité ; elle niait sa faiblesse féminine ; mais c'était par amour pour un militant dont elle se voulait l'égale. L'attitude de défi dans laquelle se crispent les Américaines prouve qu'elles sont hantées par le sentiment de leur féminité. Et en vérité il suffit de se promener les yeux ouverts pour constater que l'humanité se partage en deux catégories d'individus dont les vêtements, le visage, le corps, les sourires, la démarche, les intérêts, les occupations sont mani festement différents : peut-être ces différences sont-elles superficielles, peut-être sont-elles destinées à disparaître. Ce qui est certain c'est que pour l'instant elles existent avec

the word "woman." American women in particular think that 'woman' as such does not exist; their advice is to go get psychoanalyzed to rid yourself of this obsession. Concerning a particularly irritating book titled *Modern Woman; a lost sex*, Dorothy Parker wrote: "I cannot be just to books which treat of women as women... My idea is that all of us, men as well as women, should be regarded as human beings." But nominalism as a doctrine is somewhat lacking, and anti-feminists have a challenge in proving that women are *not* men. Certainly, women are, like men, human beings; but this is an abstract statement. The fact is, every human being is always singularly situated. Refusing notions of the 'eternal feminine', the 'Black spirit' or the 'Jewish character' is certainly not denying that, in today's world, there exist Jews, Blacks and women. Denying this fact does not represent a liberation for the concerned parties, but an inauthentic escape. Clearly, a woman can only pretend to be above her sex in bad faith. A few years ago now, a well-known female writer refused to allow her picture to appear in a series of photographs dedicated to female writers: she wanted to be shown among the men. But she used her husband's influence to obtain this privilege. Women who claim to be men do not receive the same respect and praise as men. I also recall a young Trotskyist – she was standing on a platform in the middle of a boisterous meeting and was preparing to punch somebody despite her evident fragility: she overcame her feminine weakness; but this was for the love of an activist that she wanted to be equal to. The tensely confrontational attitude held by American women proves that they are haunted by the feeling of their femininity. Truly, one only needs to walk around with their eyes open to understand that humanity is split into two categories of individuals whose clothing, face, body, smiles, gait, interests and professions are obviously different: maybe these differences are superficial, maybe they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that, for the moment, there is undeniable evidence for their existence.

If the designation of 'female' is an insufficient definition of what woman is, and if we refuse to explain it by the "eternal feminine", but if, despite this, we provisionally admit that there are women on earth, we must then ask ourselves: what is a woman? I find that this formulation of the problem suggests an initial response. It is significant that I must ask this question. A man would not have

une éclatante évidence.
Si sa fonction de femelle ne suffit pas à définir la femme, si nous refusons aussi de l'expliquer par « l'éternel féminin » et si cependant nous admettons que, fût-ce à titre provisoire, il y a des femmes sur terre, nous avons donc à nous poser la question : qu'est-ce qu'une femme ?

L'énoncé même du problème me suggère aussitôt une première réponse. Il est significatif que je le pose. Un homme n'aurait pas idée d'écrire un livre sur la situation singulière qu'occupent dans l'humanité les mâles2. Si je veux me définir je suis obligée d'abord de déclarer : « Je suis une femme » ; cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s'enlèvera toute autre affirmation. Un homme ne commence jamais par se poser comme un individu d'un certain sexe : qu'il soit homme, cela va de soi. C'est d'une manière formelle, sur les registres des mairies et dans les déclarations d'identité que les rubriques : masculin, féminin, apparaissent comme symétriques. Le rapport des deux sexes n'est pas celui de deux électricités, de deux pôles : l'homme représente à la fois le positif et le neutre au point qu'on dit en français « les hommes » pour désigner les êtres humains, le sens singulier du mot « vir » s'étant assimilé au sens général du mot « homo ». La femme apparaît comme le négatif si bien que toute détermination lui est imputée comme limitation, sans réciprocité. Je me suis agacée parfois au cours de discussions abstraites d'entendre des hommes me dire : « Vous pensez telle chose parce que vous êtes une femme » ; mais je savais que ma seule défense, c'était de répondre : « Je la pense parce qu'elle est vraie » éliminant par là ma subjectivité ; il n'était pas question de répliquer : « Et vous pensez le contraire parce que vous êtes un homme » ; car il est entendu que le fait d'être un homme n'est pas une singularité ; un homme est dans son droit en étant homme, c'est la femme qui est dans son tort. Pratiquement, de même que pour les anciens il y avait une verticale absolue par rapport à laquelle se définissait l'oblique, il y a un type humain absolu qui est le type masculin.

the idea to write a book about the particular position that males occupy among humankind. If I want to define myself, I must first declare "I am a woman." This truth is the base upon which I can construct all other affirmations. A man never begins by positioning himself as an individual of a certain sex: it goes without saying that he is a man. It is only in formal matters, on marriage registers and other official documents, that masculine and feminine appear to be symmetrical. The relationship between the two sexes is not like it is between the two electricities, the two poles: man represents both the positive and the neutral, to the point that in French we say "man" to designate humankind, and the particular meaning of the Latin vir has been conflated with the general meaning of *homo*. Woman appear so completely as a negative that all of her unique characteristics are defined as limitations, without reciprocity. In abstract discussions, I have sometimes been aggravated when men tell me "you only think this because you are a woman"; but I knew that my only defense was to respond that "I think it because it is true", eliminating my subjectivity. There was no question of replying "and you think the opposite because you are a man", because it is understood that the fact of being a man is ordinary. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. Practically, just as the ancients had an absolute vertical by which they defined the diagonal, there is an absolute human type – the masculine. •

GRAPHIC

ARTS

Sophia Zandi

Julia Fried

Grace McAllister

Sophia Zandi

Grace McAllister

DENT CLUB

RORY O'DONOGHUE

Waking up on the operating table, I looked down and felt like I saw salsa again, but this time it was blood radiating out from my bandage. My chest was rabbiting up and down, horrifying and uncontained. I remember the visual shock before the pain, but then my eyes spun out and pain hijacked my senses. I had broken bones before—a collarbone, a leg, my nose—but this was another realm entirely. I sobbed in the ICU and begged for anything that could help as my parents massaged my hands. I was on intravenous narcotics, and an epidural was lodged midway up my spine, but I felt sober and busted as fuck.

"You shouldn't be feeling anything," the nurse added helpfully as he dressed my bandage, "that epidural is loading you up real good," and I wanted to bite his head off.

"It...hurts...so...bad," I whimpered. Each word eviscerated me. Eventually, nurses gave me oral opioids, and I slipped into a groggy din.

Ravaged. Such was the immediate aftermath of the Ravitch procedure, a corrective operation for a congenital chest wall disorder—*pectus excavatum*. The name was like an incantation when I first learned it, beguiling, before I knew its full potential. *Pectus Excavatum*! Now, almost two years after my operation, the condition sounds much more insidious. It exploded into an epidemic menacing my extended family. I was patient zero.

The night before my surgery, my best friend Amelia called me from Alaska.

"I showed your family the salsa video," she told me, trying to calm me down. "Your mom laughed but your dad couldn't watch—he was too uneasy."

I touched the bruised hollow of my chest, sunken deep in between my pecs and large enough to easily fit an entire fist. I remembered how my friends had eaten salsa out of it at the reservoir several summers ago. The beach was packed, and I was wildly uncomfortable—it had taken a lot of mental acrobatics before I had taken off my shirt at all. Amelia poured the chunky Tostitos over my chest, a makeshift ramekin, and it felt like icy sludge. We went through two bags of Hint of Lime chips, and filmed the whole feast.

Since then I'd grown, escaping most of my highschool anxieties. Although my dent deepened in the years since that video was taken, I felt more at ease. This evolving sense of security continued, blooming until my body hit its carrying capacity.

"I can't believe I'm getting fixed tomorrow," I confided, marveling at the sheer absurdity of my impending reconfiguration. "No more chips!"

Many months and a twisted series of events later, I found myself comforting my older cousin Keelin on the eve of her own surgery.

"Yeah dude, I'm freaked."

She looked it. I took a generous sip of cucumber martini as I listened, searching for something reassuring to say to her. I traced the edges of my scar, a year and a half old but still a jagged line etched down the front of my chest.

"It's a new life, starting tomorrow. You're going to feel so much better."

As I spoke, I felt a jumbled knot of responsibility, but also helplessness. Her parents were there, too, all of us out to eat for Keelin's last non-hospital meal for a while. Everyone was on the brink of unravelling.

"You're my rock," she responded, taking my hand. "I've been so all over the place. I cried at karaoke till the bar closed last night. I look at how wonderful you're doing now, though, and I know I'll make it through."

"Yeah you will!" I hoped I sounded convincing. "Listen, O'Donoghue Dent Club means business. We're fighters."

Later that night, I spiralled through the harrowing events of the past two years. Keelin's would be the fourth major reconstructive chest surgery in the family, a now far too familiar cycle that all started with me.

I was doing wonderful, but Keelin's imminent operation had me reeling again. First me, then my younger sister; now, my cousin. I still wasn't over the shock of such a serious condition lying latent in each of us. *What about the others?* I worried about my endless clan of Irish-Catholic cousins. *What if someone else is next?*

The human sternum, or breastbone, can tragically go any which way. *Pectus carinatum* describes an uncommon condition where the sternum protrudes outward, jutting out from the chest wall. *Pectus excavatum* is just the opposite, where the sternum plunges inward and depresses the thoracic cavity. Each condition brings its own host of health problems, but *excavatum* squeezes, inhibiting the regular room the lungs and heart take to function. It carves a chunk out of the working capacity of the chest, bowling in where it should be filling out.

This was the main takeaway from the Googling I did in high school; as a clarinetist prepping for conservatory training, I started psyching myself out. What if the crater hindered my progress, or even my career? It changed with puberty and seemed to be continuously expanding. Confident that I felt mostly fine, active as both a musician and a student athlete, I struggled to comprehend its potential. Tracing my contours in the mirror, I gave myself pep-talks.

You're beautiful.
You're healthy.
You're okay.

Pediatricians never said anything about my disfigurement. I scoured the internet, and as I read, I grew more aware of the chest space I lacked. A big chunk was missing. Sifting through pictures and other people's testimonies, I had no gauge of how severe my deformity was. Or maybe—in some repressed back alley of my mind—I knew something was awry.

Senior year of high school, I made an appointment with my physician. After explaining my concerns and discussing the condition, he fired up the ancient HP monitor in the patient room and printed out the Mayo Clinic overview of the condition.

"It's all I got," he apologized, handing it to me. "So long as you aren't in pain, I think you're ok." Dismayed by this wet-lettuce diagnosis, I saw no other option but to continue on into the uneasy unknown.

With *pectus excavatum*, rather than staying relatively parallel, the pectus sternum sinks down toward the spine, approaching perpendicular. This intrusion pins the heart against the spinal cord, smooshing the lungs outward. The condition ranges from merely cosmetic to dangerously severe, with many murky stages in between. For conditions that need surgery, several different routes are available. Circumstances are best when the condition is flagged earlier in life, allowing for easier corrective recourse. For older, more ossified patients, especially those with deep-trench dents like me, the invasive Ravitch procedure is likely the best option.

The primary issue of *pectus excavatum* is the way the malformed hardware angles the sternum down toward the heart, which is what the Ravitch aims to correct. First, the surgeon severs the ribs and cartilage attached to the sternum. Once freed of the abnormal tissue, the sternum bounces back into correct position, buoyed up by the strong muscles of the heart. A titanium plate is then affixed atop the sternum, fastened it into place with screws drilled into the bone. Once a valley, the chest wall is reworked into a plateau. With reconstruction complete, sternum parallel with spine, everything is stitched back up and made to look as neat as possible.

Over the years that followed my sparknotes-style pediatric visit, I continued my research, and poured over pictures of scars. Some were faint traces, threadlike, and some were gnarly shark jaws. Fantasizing about flatness, I wondered how it would feel to be rid of my own extreme topography.

I repeated this cycle every few months, often following some instance of insecurity. In moments of confidence, I fell back on the cautious ignorance of my uninformed pediatrician, twisting it into reassurance—*surely he would have referred me to a specialist if I needed it?* But I never fully drove out the incipient doubt lodged firmly deep down.

What if my skeleton bowls further inwards and I slowly squeeze myself out? What if the hollowing completes itself and I have a hole that goes all the way through like a human cheerio? What if I'm impaled, but there's nothing to impale?

I eventually felt tired and ambivalent about it all. *So what. There's nothing I can do.* It was my own little quirk, and sometimes it even had its perks.

Freshman year of college, I'd allow a chosen few to take body shots out of me at parties. It was very intimate, and disgusting, but it was fun. My dent was also immensely practical for snacking—I could firmly lodge a bowl of cereal in it while lying down.

If I breathed in and out while swiveling side to side, my dent would work my lungs like bellows, forcing air in and out. This was completely involuntary—I didn't have to actually breathe; the squeezing breathed for me. I would feel extremely lightheaded, but generally I thought it was kind of cool.

Moreover, there was a disconnect between the visual and the physical. My chest looked every bit as bizarre as the serious cases sprinkled throughout the internet, but my symptoms didn't seem severe. A lifelong cross-country skier, I never noticed a discrepancy between me and my teammates, even though the one 25K race I ever did felt like slowly dying a two hour death. I ran, I skated, I swam.

As a wind musician, I pushed. There were moments in orchestra where my vision would blur, but it was usually at a point of musical climax, everyone wrapped in full-blown intensity; I assumed it was hard for

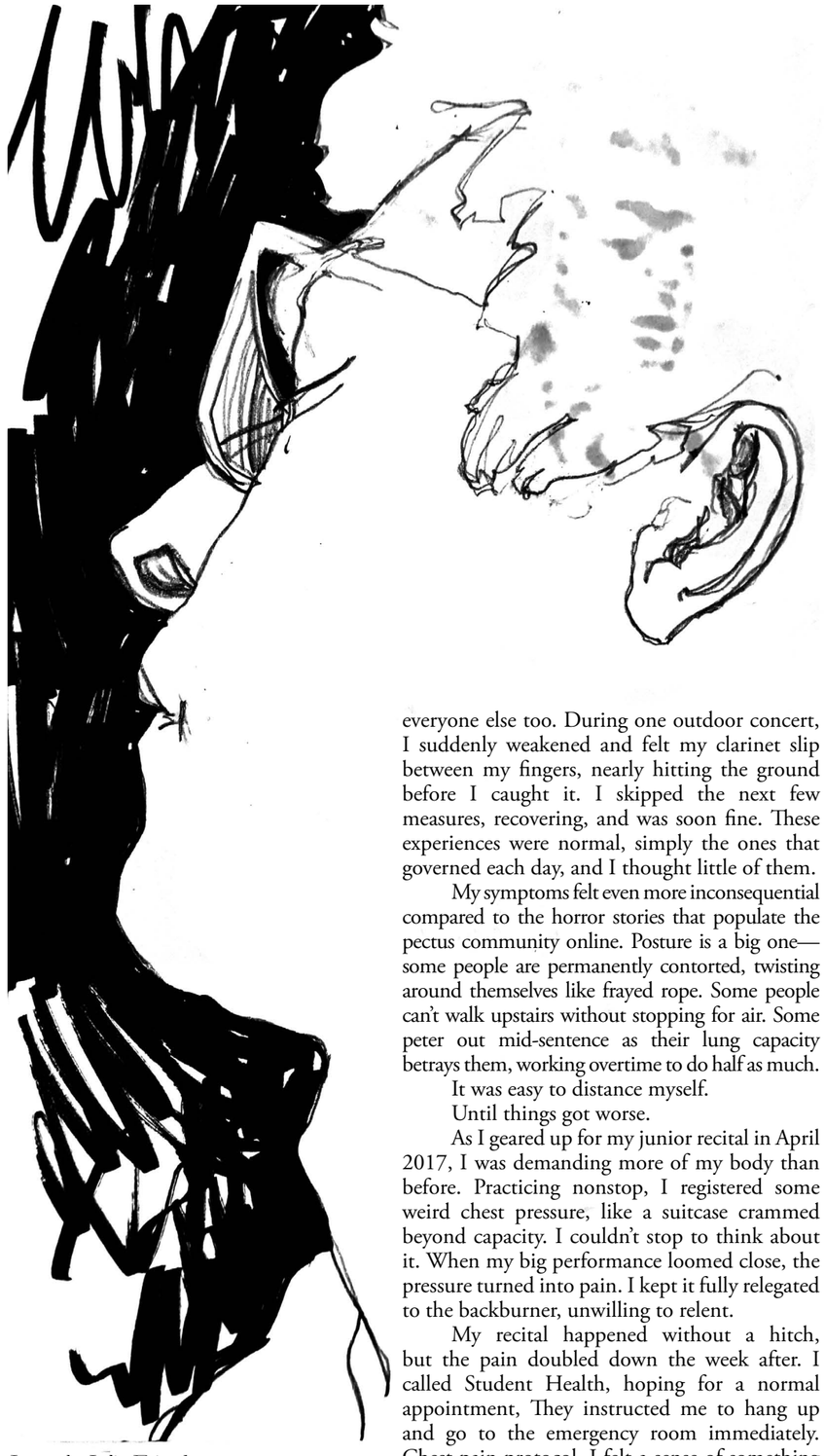


Image by Julia Friend

everyone else too. During one outdoor concert, I suddenly weakened and felt my clarinet slip between my fingers, nearly hitting the ground before I caught it. I skipped the next few measures, recovering, and was soon fine. These experiences were normal, simply the ones that governed each day, and I thought little of them.

My symptoms felt even more inconsequential compared to the horror stories that populate the pectus community online. Posture is a big one—some people are permanently contorted, twisting around themselves like frayed rope. Some people can't walk upstairs without stopping for air. Some peter out mid-sentence as their lung capacity betrays them, working overtime to do half as much.

It was easy to distance myself.

Until things got worse.

As I geared up for my junior recital in April 2017, I was demanding more of my body than before. Practicing nonstop, I registered some weird chest pressure, like a suitcase crammed beyond capacity. I couldn't stop to think about it. When my big performance loomed close, the pressure turned into pain. I kept it fully relegated to the backburner, unwilling to relent.

My recital happened without a hitch, but the pain doubled down the week after. I called Student Health, hoping for a normal appointment, They instructed me to hang up and go to the emergency room immediately. Chest pain protocol. I felt a sense of something loosening as I headed to Mercy Allen Hospital. Not an emergency visit per se, but the inevitable start of something new.

As I checked myself in and discussed the pain, I was whisked away to what I thought would be any number of different tests. The room where they took me felt tired—cracked linoleum floors, scungy pamphlets, washed-up monitors that probably should have been retired years ago. They did an electrocardiogram to ensure I wasn't actively dying, and then the doctor on call (a podiatrist) entered the room to talk to me.

"Well, your vitals look good, nothing seems too wrong. We've got to talk about your chest though...it's pretty deformed."

"Yeah, haha, I know," I managed, instantly recalling every offhand locker room comment that haunted my childhood. He went on. "Basically, you don't have enough space in there for what you're trying to do."

"Um...what do you mean?"

"You've got to work with what you've got. Your body is made wrong. At least for what you're doing. You're gonna need to make some substantial lifestyle changes or else you're not gonna make it."

Well aware that I wasn't exactly mistreating my body, I was skeptical and upset. *What was it that I was "doing?"*

I asked if he could refer me to a specialist.

"No, we don't really do that."

They sent me on my way, equipped with nothing but a prescription for taking it easy. I called my mom. "Yeah, I dunno." I binge chewed gum. "That was pretty useless."

I located a team of specialists at the Cleveland Clinic, but they couldn't see me until June. Two months to wait. Cue my liminal, nebulous anxiety. Pressure mounted, but the physical blurred into the mental; I couldn't tell what was truly internal or not.

I scaled everything back, bowing out of performing for the rest of the semester and begrudgingly complying with Mercy's lifestyle changes, which felt like a crock of bullshit. I stopped exercising, forcibly relaxed, and waited to figure out what was up.

My appointment finally rolled around, and this time I underwent a complex array of tests. One particular gem was the worst thing I've ever agreed to do in any setting—sprinting on a stationary bike and inducing repeated hyperventilation while my blood was drawn. They told me to wear casual clothes, but my skinny jeans and birkenstocks were devastatingly incorrect. Afterwards, sitting ill at ease in wet denim, I finally had my answer.

The Haller Index (HI) is the standard metric for assessing chest dents. It's a ratio of the actual distance between the sternum and spine compared to the potential normal distance, with ribcage size factored in as well. An HI under two is considered normal variation, between two and five means possible candidacy for surgery, and cases over 3.5 are severe and would absolutely benefit from surgical correction.

Mine was a 6.9.

"A...what?" I stammered.

"Yeah, it's a big boy," Dr. Raymond joked. "Your HI is in the top 5% worst reported cases."

"For some people it's more a matter of cosmetics," he explained. His voice was warmly comforting, sturdy and tinged with a light asthmatic wheeze. "Their chests are abnormal enough to warrant concern, but we can't really guarantee that surgery would improve things one way or the other. With you, there's no question."

As I listened to Dr. Raymond, I felt as if the leatherette chair firmly beneath me transformed into an ejection seat, catapulting me into the air. I was still recovering from the blood-bike stint, but my heart rate took off again. He went on.

"Your breathing capacity is—at most—70% of what it could be. Your circulation is greatly impacted. Most people in your condition can't even walk up stairs. We're frankly pretty baffled that you've made it this far unencumbered. It's going to change your life."

It was as affirming as it was terrifying. Suddenly, everything leapt into flux. Above all else, I felt quiet validation. Life truly had been as hard as it felt! A less constricted future is possible? I called my parents, excited to finally have some clarity, and told them I had good news. "WTF," they reacted when I told them the prognosis, "that is not good news."

This response sobered me up.

Everything was set to change. I cancelled my plans to study abroad, full scholarship, at 中央音乐学院 (Central Conservatory of Music) in Beijing. I called the clarinet instructor at the prestigious summer festival I'd been accepted to and told him I couldn't attend. Dr. Raymond thought it best to move quickly, and I scheduled my appointment. I had three weeks.

Surgery steamrolled me, flattening everything out, and the immediate aftermath was all violet haze as my new form solidified. My senses slowly trickled back, grappling for autonomy over the dizzying array of narcotics coursing through my system, and I re-met my body. Recovery was an amorphous blur, and I measured it by triumph checkpoints:

Day 2: I breathed my deepest breaths. I cried at the awe of it all.

Day 4: My catheter was removed. Peeing autonomously was a momentous victory.

Day 5: Released from the hospital, I took my first car ride. Even the smallest jostle was an intimate reminder of the new titanium sorely affixed onto my sternum. Still, leaving the hospital was joyous.

Day 7: "You have a visitor!" My mom woke me and stepped out of the way to reveal my boyfriend. "Hi!" he said cheerily. He flew across the country to surprise me, and I was certain I was hallucinating. "...What?" I was dumbfounded, and turned to the wall to clear my vision. But he was there, and my heart flooded with lightness.

Day 10: My drainage tube, which siphoned out upwards of 30ml of bloody pulp per day, was removed. "Exhale!" my doctor commanded as she pulled it out from the tiny incision above my belly-button, but I gasped. The tube was 10 inches longer than I expected.

Day 17: I weaned off Oxycodone. Although I still kept up maximum doses of Tylenol and Ibuprofen, sensation sharpened into a grittier reality. I felt raw.

Day 22: Dr. Raymond cleared me to make the long flights back to Alaska at last. Turbulence bruised me, and I felt like I might split open. I was home.

In an effort to find clarity in all the murky delirium, I walked. I treated myself to a fitbit and spent my days in the woods, taking my dogs on five, six, seven mile expeditions. Everything was easier than before. Climbing steep hills, my eyes stayed sharp, free of the dizziness I had always taken for granted. Bewitched by interior Alaska's summer sprawl of 24-hour sun, I walked my way through recovery. Days and nights of hikes turned into weeks and months:

Month 2: I flew back to school for fall semester, relying on complete strangers to lift my bags and open doors for me because I could not.

Month 4: At last, cleared to run! That first time back on the treadmill, my atrophied muscles were quaking but my lungs were so full.

Month 6: Finally, blissfully, I got to take my back brace off. I lifted more than 5 lbs for the first time in 6 months.

These first few months were grueling, full of maddening plateaus of progress and speckled with sharp, bitter pain, but the sheer newness of everyday activities was thrilling. Walking my dogs. Standing up quickly. Holding my breath. Every activity was imbued with a newfound ability. *So this is what it feels like.*

Just as I emerged from the danger zone post surgery, my family flew into chaos once again. Rachel needed dent surgery too.

Thirteen and on the brink of highschool, my spunky younger sister had gone through the slew of tests back when I was in the hospital, just to be safe. We knew she had *pectus excavatum* too, and I had urged my parents to get hers looked at while we were all in Cleveland.

"I don't want her to end up like me!" I guilted them dramatically, and unfairly. They, of course, felt terrible that I'd gone so long without seeing a specialist. And now her tests had come back. Hers was severe.

My parents chose Cleveland Clinic, my own thoracic alma mater, for Rachel's procedure. Suddenly the four of us were there again. Younger and infinitely more malleable than me, she would be undergoing the Nuss rather than the Ravitch, the minimally-invasive of the two. Nuss incisions are cut at the side rather than down the front, into which a curved stainless steel bar spanning the entire chest is threaded. Angled down, the bar is then torqued outward, popping the malformed cartilage out as if fixing a dented car. If all goes well, the hardware is removed after two years, unlike the Ravitch's permanent plate, and the ribcage holds its new structure on its own.

As Rachel went through her prescribed pre-op routine the night before her appointment, she maintained ferocious chill.

"It's gotta get done," she said matter-of-factly, "so I'm doing it."

We called our brother, who was born between the two of us and irritatingly unafflicted by the condition. He felt bad, wishing he could be there. He also didn't exactly know what we were going through, and the older brother in me was relieved to keep him away from all of it.

Rachel sounded so unbothered. She had been by my side throughout my entire ordeal, witnessing my agony in the ICU first-hand, and here she was, assuaging the rest of our anxiety with her own steadfast confidence. I loved her so much for it.

Early the next morning, she was markedly more tense as we headed to the hospital, but still determined.

"I can't wait to boss people around!" she joked. "You're gonna be my servants!"

I'll do anything for you, I thought, terrified. *Please please please make it through okay.*

Even as she changed into her gown, she kept her resolve. A nurse gave her "happy juice," a pediatric cocktail to ease the worries most kids experience. She unnervingly laughed herself to sleep. We could do nothing but wait.

Watching my sister go through hell was far worse than going through it myself. From her first waking hours, tripping hard in the "Harry Potter Land" she emphatically described to the nurses, to the long days of harsh reality that followed, I held her hand and willed her to be safe.

She was immensely nauseous, annihilated by each successive incompatible narcotic that her care team tried, and each time she vomited I imagined her bar racketing around inside.

I snapped at the nurses.

I berated my beyond-exhausted parents, harping on them every time they misremembered a minor detail while talking to doctors. I spent night after sleepless night in her room. Even though I wasn't helping anything, I couldn't leave her.

Her surgery happened during my spring break, and as soon as she was discharged from the hospital I went back to school. Her initial recovery was much like mine—hard, amorphous, changing day by day. My family eventually headed home, and I felt a wash of guilt-tinged relief.

"The bar slipped," my mom said blankly, in shock.

"It's been moving. They looked closely at her two month post-op x-rays, and its rotating upwards."

I sunk into a sick dread.

"The shift is driving it like a wedge against her sternum," my Dad followed. "They're worried it's going to depress back down."

Aside from immediate complications, recurrence of pectus excavatum is every patient's main concern. It occurs in just around 10% of cases. Rachel's hadn't fully recurred, but doctors flagged the warning signs during her check-up, and called my parents.

"She's gotta get it redone."

It was only a matter of when.

"It's a little riskier," her new doctor, a specialist in Nuss redos (who studied under Nuss himself) at Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters in Virginia, explained. "We have to work around all the scar tissue, and we won't know how much there is until we're in. But the sooner, the better." They would remove the old bar, cut away the messy lattice of scar tissue, and install two new ones.

This was my deepest fear. Relapse and a second surgery seemed inconceivably awful. And now Rachel had to go through it.

However frightening, surgery came and went, upending everything once again but much more successful than the botched first go round. I couldn't be there this time, which was probably a blessing for everyone involved.

Fittingly, Hurricane Florence was in full swing, menacing Virginia and complicating an already dramatic process. My parents slept at the hospital because their AirBnB was evacuated. At the center of the storm, Rachel weathered the second overhaul of her body well, and everything went smoothly.

She kept the first bar and fashioned it into an earring rack, mounted on a backboard she painted. It's a substantial size, at least a foot long and alarmingly thick. "And soon I'll have two more!"

Keelin's went well too. She's now five months post-op, Rachel nearly seven (from the second operation), and come June, I'll be at two years of unrestricted breathing. Life—this new, more manageable one—feels surreal. I still scrutinize myself in the mirror, chronically self-obsessed, but it's no longer flushed with fear. I look at myself and think about my heart, lounging around happily in its new terrain. I celebrate my lungs and imagine their abundant joy at inhabiting such luxurious quarters.

Maybe I'll run marathons. Or maybe I'll just sit outside, happily taking in each billowing chestful of summer's air, silky-sweet. Either way, it's a delightful gift to finally feel whole.

This is the future I see waiting for Rachel and Keelin. We are all getting through this together. It's a makeshift support group, but it's a lovely one—no one else really understands. We're the O'Donoghue Dent Club, an illustrious society composed of our own weird trifecta. Benefits of membership include permanent bragging rights, grisly scars, and a whole lot of shared empathy. The ODC is a highly exclusive club; as Founding Member, I'm hoping for no more recruits. •

VISUAL PROCESSES: EVA KOCHER

Bridget Conway for Wilder Voice: Give us a brief introduction to your art. What themes and ideas do you work with? What materials?

Eva Kocher: Since starting at Oberlin, I've really been driven by my identity. I have been making work that relates to my Blackness and my struggle to find a place as a biracial person who comes from a displaced Black heritage. But my personal story is what I usually tend to draw my inspiration from. Dealing with these different struggles, I've had to find my own voice in art history and I think a lot of when I first started making work I was doing all the photography and making art that spoke to that very explicitly.

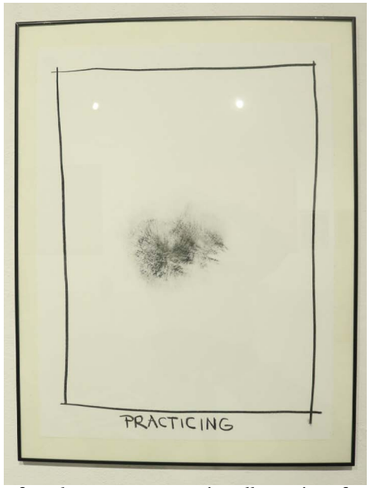
In my junior year, I decided that I wanted to take a step back from creating images that felt a little bit too obvious or heavy-handed. I wanted to go back to working with my hands and try to evoke the same sort of visceral reactions that I was trying to do in my photography through physical objects. Finding this abstractness in this relationship to Blackness. When I was first beginning to make work I related it to my history, my Blackness and my identity as a woman of color, specifically a biracial woman, and existing in this world, but also in Oberlin College—I felt like I really needed to prove myself as an artist.

There's just so much pressure to create work that talks about my identity, so I wanted to step away from that and create work that just spoke to me. I trust that it all has to do with who I am and the experiences that I have, but it isn't trying to prove anything to anyone else. It's more about an experience of catharsis for myself, a rebuilding and recontextualization of my history and where I exist in history. I began making more sculptures and, in my junior year, I started working a lot with hair, as you can see here. I am going back to that this year which I'm really excited about. Hair for me has always been this very charged thing.

My mom is African-American, my dad is white, blonde. I always was told that I grew up with "good hair," that's just a term that's used a lot in the Black community. Being biracial, I had looser curls and I was told to love my natural hair. There are all of these ideas of class and gender and femininity wrapped up in hair. My mom has a lot of struggles, a lot of internal conflict. She grew up in an upper-middle-class Black family, so there are all of these things that she hung on to. She was trying to live vicariously through me, her light-skinned biracial daughter. Me and my mom are super close and so I always hung onto every word that she said and I really wanted to always be the best for her. Once I came to college I connected to the Black community here and found myself in that community in a different way—separate from my own family. I was thinking about ways in which I could exert my own autonomy by changing my hairstyles: getting boxed braids and getting extensions with synthetic hair and using that as a way to connect myself to this culture that I was always told I couldn't be a part of.

My work is very process-based and a lot of the work that I make comes out of a very long contemplative process. Creating work and going through the ritual is doing these certain things which will then ultimately lead to the final production. So, I started off doing a lot of braiding with various materials—I was using a rope, I was using synthetic areas, using real hair and making these long braids. I was doing that because the ritual of braiding felt very important. It felt very connected to this history of braiding in the Black community, which is something I wasn't really exposed to in the same way that a lot of other Black people were. But not having done that disconnected me from something. I started doing that and was creating a lot of different sculptures with hair. I created a few prints using hair and seeing how I can insert myself this thing that I wasn't really a part of.

I also did a photography project with my mom during junior year where I had her dress up in different traditional styles, like hairstyles that are a part of Black culture. I had her wear a wig, I had her wear a durag, I had her hair natural, I put a scarf on her head and wrapped her hair, and took these portraits. They were these very raw depictions of her. That was really important for me moving forward this year. Work in the past has



often been very emotionally taxing for me—constantly making work that is meaningful. I was kind of trying to step back from that, so I started doing a lot of drawing this year, going back and making things that were more abstract.

I started thinking about the other ways I've been empowered as a woman of color. I started thinking about sports: expressions of aggression and movement and music. I was forcing myself to trust my intuition and trust that all these things are a part of me. Creating art as a woman of color in itself is a revolutionary act, and Black abstraction is not something to stray from. In a lot of ways, it has been even more empowering to be able to make work that is inherently tied to who I am but doesn't have to speak explicitly to my experience. Or translate that experience for the viewer and create work that feels good and is coming from a very real place.

Coming into my final thesis exhibition, I wanted to go back to making work that didn't speak very explicitly to my experience. I'm working a lot with generations. Something that was a huge part of my family history was tied to Martha's Vineyard. My mom's family was one of the first Black family to own property on Martha's Vineyard and my family's been going there for the past seven generations. I'm the seventh generation, and so the number seven is coming up a lot in my work. A huge part of my displacement and disconnection from the outside of my family is because there's a complicated history resulting in my family having to give up a lot, and not really being able to continue that connection to Martha's Vineyard. A lot of family trauma has been caused by that and that has been like a really really difficult experience that I've grappled with for a very long time. I'm trying to go back through it and recreate my own, I don't want to say history, but try to create a future that feels less tied to trauma and more about rebuilding in the way that I know how to. I am trying to focus less on the things that I feel detached from and I tend to dwell on the negative parts of my history. But I want to focus on my history in a way that's meaningful for me and not for anyone else.

BC: I'm really intrigued by your charcoal drawings. Can you explain what you're referencing and your process for them?

EK: I'm really inspired by the work of David Hammons. He's incredible. He's a Black installation artist, activist and performance artist. He has these pieces that are whole-body prints. In some of his earliest works, he covered certain parts of his body in oil and printed basketballs and stuff like that. That's a body of work that is really inspiring to me, especially when I was first working with hair. So I have had these boxing gloves for a while. As a woman of color, I often feel like I'm defending myself and having to find ways to feel empowered within myself. I'm working with the ideas of protection and femininity. I am also thinking about the exertion of anger. I'm highlighting the beauty and light in anger and aggression--not just as a woman, but specifically as a woman of color. I am thinking about that a lot. There are lots of associations with boxing and African-Americans. So I have these gloves, and they are making me think about a lot of things.

Outside of that, I was really fascinated by how they're cracking. It reminded me a lot of human skin and self-preservation. I was wondering how I could I find a way to print this because I really wanted to use this texture. Originally, I was going to paint a page and print it. But then I realized that wasn't going to work. I was like, maybe I could use charcoal. So I covered that original piece of paper with charcoal and tried to put my fist to it, but it didn't show up. Obviously, it didn't work out at all. But then I wondered how I could get the charcoal off of my gloves, so I punched another piece of paper to just try to get it off and I really was fascinated by the way the charcoal came off of the paper. When I punched it, it just felt really beautiful. It felt like a performance in a way that felt really empowering to me. So I started making these prints, and I was like, what if I was able to capture this action on a piece of paper? And what if you were able to see the vibrations and see the power that I put into this, and find some sort of like beauty in that? So, I started creating all of these prints, and every time I did it, I would do a different combination. They feel really serious, but they're also very playful. I was like, okay, I'll frame them to give them this reverence, but in this very playful way. Every time I did a different combination, I would write what I did. I was thinking of the titles as a way to explain the way that each one made me feel. I decided to tie it back to who I am rather than the actual icons of boxing because boxing is something I don't really have any experience or history with. But this act was really meaningful and a huge part of my process and my thought process in this whole project that I've been working on like this whole body of work it just felt really essential. I felt like there is a need to sort of just like put my own personhood into the pieces and it's kind of like what the newer titles are related to.

BC: Could you talk about the various pops of color around the studio? How does color figure in your work?

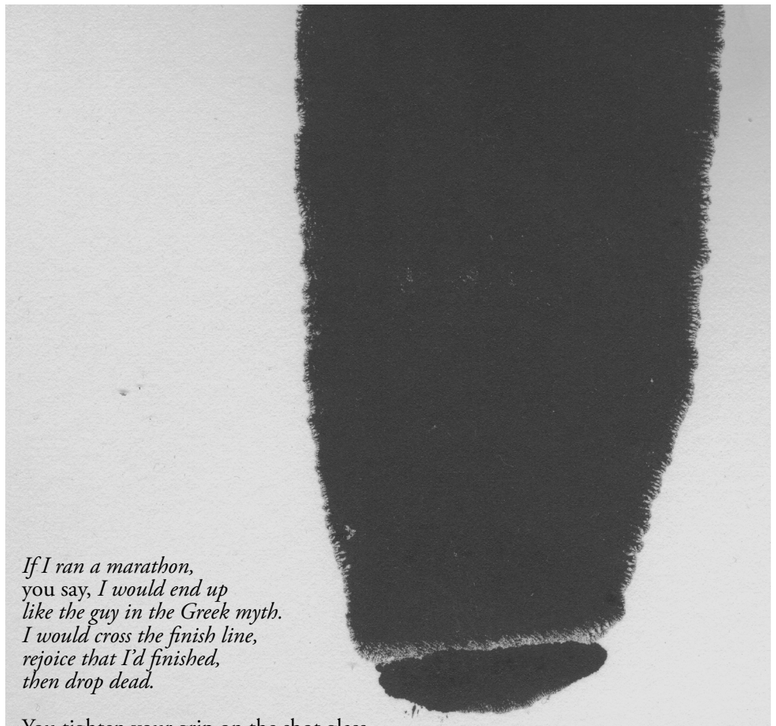
EK: In my house, there is a lot of African art. My great aunt was a figure in the Harlem Renaissance. She had a lot of pieces with a ton of color in them. That was my first inspiration and my first example of a successful Black female artist. I think just having these big pops of color have always kind of like brought me back to that. I'm thinking about the history of African art and work from West Africa. I was also inspired by the colors we considered in class with Matthew Rarey. So I started doing a lot of investigation of that. I was also part of a group called Dance Diaspora which is West African dance. It was one of the many ways that I was able to really find community here among other students of color. I was very inspired by the prints that we wore in the performances. Those colors are important to me. The color red has also always been important--it's in the American flag, and to me it symbolizes blood and pain. It's also in the Swiss flag. I always go back to red. I'm always attracted to red. With the black and white, I don't really know if there is a reason. I'm really attracted to like very simplistic things, and there's always been this like cleanliness and order associated with like just like black and white images for me.

BC: Who or what do you count as inspiration for your work?

EK: It's hard to say, honestly. I have so many inspirations. My first and foremost inspiration is my mom. She's a part of everything I do, every work I create. And by extension, my grandma (my Nana), who passed away when I was eleven. She continues to be a huge part of who I am. And then my dad, and my family in general. I've always been really really close to them and they shaped me into who I am. They are behind everything in terms of my artistic inspirations. I am also inspired by David Hammons, as I mentioned earlier. One of my hugest inspirations ever. And he continues to be. And Johnny Coleman is one of my greatest inspirations and mentors. There's like a lot of different artists I'm inspired by that I haven't mentioned. I kind of go in waves of who's inspiring me at the moment.•

SAMUEL FISHMAN

BOSTON: APRIL 15, 2013



If I ran a marathon,
you say, *I would end up*
like the guy in the Greek myth.
I would cross the finish line,
rejoice that I'd finished,
then drop dead.

You tighten your grip on the shot glass,
testing its frailty, its resistance to your stress.
know what's going to happen before you
do, so I ask the bartender for a towel, a
couple of bandaids, rubbing alcohol, and
more alcohol.

I would drop dead, you say, staring at
the front door. When it rattles on its
hinges, you're so absorbed in its clatter
that you don't notice your palm as it
splits across the countertop.•

DONKEY BRAINS:
THE PROBLEM SET OF LOSING DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES SINCE 1968

1968 Problem: The former vice president, and soon-to-be-crook, is leading in the polls. Solution: Allow the presidential convention to take place while a riot is happening outside, and allow the news cameras to film students being sprayed in the mouth with tear gas. Do not refute the soon-to-be-crook's position as the "law and order candidate."

1972 Problem: The crook is leading in the polls. Solution: Schedule the nominee, a senator best known for supporting acid, abortion, and amnesty, to give his acceptance speech at three in the morning. When the running mate is revealed to have had depression, support him with 1,000 percent certainty, then drop him.

1980 Problem: The costar of *Bedtime for Bonzo* is closing in on the president's lead in the polls. Solution: Keep the president, who was only elected because of the crook, in the Rose Garden, giving speeches about economic malaise and the virtues of wearing sweaters. Appoint the president's twelve year old daughter as his advisor on the geopolitics of nuclear weapons.

1984 Problem: The costar of *She's Working Her Way Through College* is leading in the polls. Solution: Have the nominee, the vice president of the preceding, failed administration who is best known for quoting Wendy's commercials, confess in his acceptance speech that he will raise taxes. Do not make age an issue of the campaign, while the president is 73.

1988 Problem: The vice-president of the costar of *Cattle Queen of Montana* is closing in in the polls. Solution: Plop the nominee, a Massachusetts governor whose hobby is writing weekend passes for convicted murderers, in a tank to appeal to veterans. Tell him to smile and point at reporters like he's a dork trying to impress a prom queen with his performance of "Wonderwall."

2000 Problem: The former co-owner of the Texas Rangers and the nominee are close in the polls. Solution: Train the nominee, the vice president of the current administration wracked with sex scandals, to act like a disapproving dad from a sitcom during the debates. Have him work in the word, "lockbox," in all sixteen answers about the federal budget and Medicare reform.

2004 Problem: The misunderestimated Rangers fan and the nominee are close in the polls. Solution: Train the nominee, a Massachusetts senator who has flip-flopped on the Iraq War, to brag about his war record instead of talking about the economy. When Osama bin Laden publishes a videotape, write the nominee a speech saying nothing that the president hasn't said.

2016 Problem: The second-best host of *The Apprentice* is doing well nationally.•

A FOOL'S ERRAND

SOPHIE JONES

Image by Enrico Milletti

Carol was beaten to death in her house at the edge of my hometown. There, the developments disintegrate into desert; empty lots and unpaved roads melt into furrows of granite, cheatgrass and manzanita creep back over property lines. When I was little, my dad and I often went exploring in the scrubby dells behind Carol's neighborhood, tearing the surveyors' tape off ponderosa branches and pulling their stakes out of crumbly soil. The small-town cops found her body tucked halfway beneath a tipped-over bookcase, as if there by accident. She was wearing a lavender camisole; she had eaten a salad for dinner.

Did my mom and dad sit me down to tell me about her murder, as they'd done with the other things parents are obliged to explain to their children; death of other kinds, divorce, sex? I lingered after dinner to hear the adults speculate, gleaning what I could before my mom ushered me away. I learned how to avoid the topic with her, how to pursue it with my dad. Alone in the privacy of traffic, riding in the front seat—a novel, grownup realm to which I had only just gained access—I calculated the right moment to turn down the radio and ask him a leading question.

Carol's killer left no fingerprints, no DNA. No murder weapon was ever recovered.

The story of the murder is a good one; now, I tell it at parties. It is scandalous without reflecting too badly on me or my family, depending on which details I choose to share or withhold. Sometimes my delivery is too glib. I am too familiar with the facts of the case, or else in an attempt to prove detachment—from my hometown, my parents, the murderer, the victim—I let too much slip too casually. Both listener and storyteller find themselves too close to the crime to justify morbid interest any longer.

That evening, Carol went for a three-mile run in the half-wilderness beyond her backyard. She texted her daughters, she called her mother. She sustained seven blows to the head. She did not feed her terrier dinner. The small-town cops discovered her corpse, wrapped it in a tarp, and transported it to the city in the back of the coroner's pickup.

That evening, Carol's ex-husband Steve went for a long mountain bike ride. He had a spare key to Carol's house, their daughters' childhood home. There was a club missing from his golf bag. He owed Carol alimony. There were incriminating Google searches on his computer; Steve claimed he was writing a crime novel.

Good true crime writing maintains distance. The writer must know how to tear some facts from court transcripts and police reports, and how to imagine others out of thin air. They must be able to deftly weigh these against each other so the reader never pauses to wonder how the writer could know such things. The writer must decide which details to include—that Steve's younger daughter made her father a vegetable stir-fry the night of her mother's murder—and which to omit—that my father and the murderer learned how to roll a kayak in the brick-red spring runoff of the Pariah River their freshman year of college; that the two remained best friends for twenty years until a final rift a few years prior to the murder.

Then, there are details about the case that I've almost certainly made up: that Steve entered the house before Carol did and unscrewed all the light bulbs. This can't be true, because she was home for hours before his arrival. I must have read that somewhere else, about someone else.

Writers omit details about the murdered, or else, as readers, we skip over them. They are too frightening and too small. Get too close, and pain ceases to be palatable.

Steve killed Carol in midsummer, in the desert, in the evening. It might still have been light outside when she died. I imagine that Steve and Carol's two daughters are the same ages as my sister and myself; they are several years older.

After Carol's death, my dad began a true crime memoir about her murderer. In his writing, my father is a distant narrator; detailed catalogs of Steve's skillful manipulation of the legal system, the media, his family, friends, and neighbors. His relationship to my father isn't mentioned. This is true at least for the drafts I was allowed to read.

The true crime author's authority comes from their closeness to the story. But if the writer neglects to maintain a strategic tension—allows slippage between what is real and what is embellishment, or confuses sordid details with truly sickening ones—they risk losing their reader. The writer is revealed to be a fabulist, or worse, a leech; simultaneously self-serving and -pitying. When the author becomes too close to the story, their credibility is threatened and they become a character themselves.

I was eleven when Carol was killed and seventeen when Steve was sentenced to life for the crime. I went to middle school and high school, and my dad stopped writing his book. A notable true crime author wrote a brick-sized paperback about Carol's murder; my dad is quoted on the last page. My parents got divorced, and my dad moved

back to the town where I was born, the town where Carol died. Like hers, his house is in a peripheral cul-de-sac that meanders into the scrub oak and granite dells, a landscape of eroded pink stone fractured by new construction. The town is bigger than it was when we moved away.

When I visit my hometown, my dad and I still hike in the dells but rarely pull the surveyors' tape, it's a fool's errand--the houses will go up regardless. One late afternoon, halfway up Granite Mountain, my dad pauses in the shade to consider the sheer, patinated cliff face above us. He and Steve used to rappel there, crack climbing up and then lowering each other back down over and over until backing off the precipice was second nature, until the trust was absolute. He points to a jumble of house-size boulders at the base. Steve could easily have clambered to some anonymous crevice and secreted his bloodied clothes away.

I peel off my shoes and socks and swish my feet in the shallows of a dammed reservoir outside of town. I can feel the ominous sucking current of the dam's spillways. A year after the murder, the city dredged this lake for the missing golf club and found nothing. My dad and I climb to a fire look-out on top of nearby Mingus Mountain. Directly below us, nestled in the ponderosa, a nameless pond shines like a silver dollar. My dad thinks it is more likely Steve disposed of the weapon there. •

Image by Bridget Conway

THE MOVEMENT OF THE MYTH

GABI SHINER

Editors' note: This piece contains mentions of mental illness, suicide, and sexual violence.

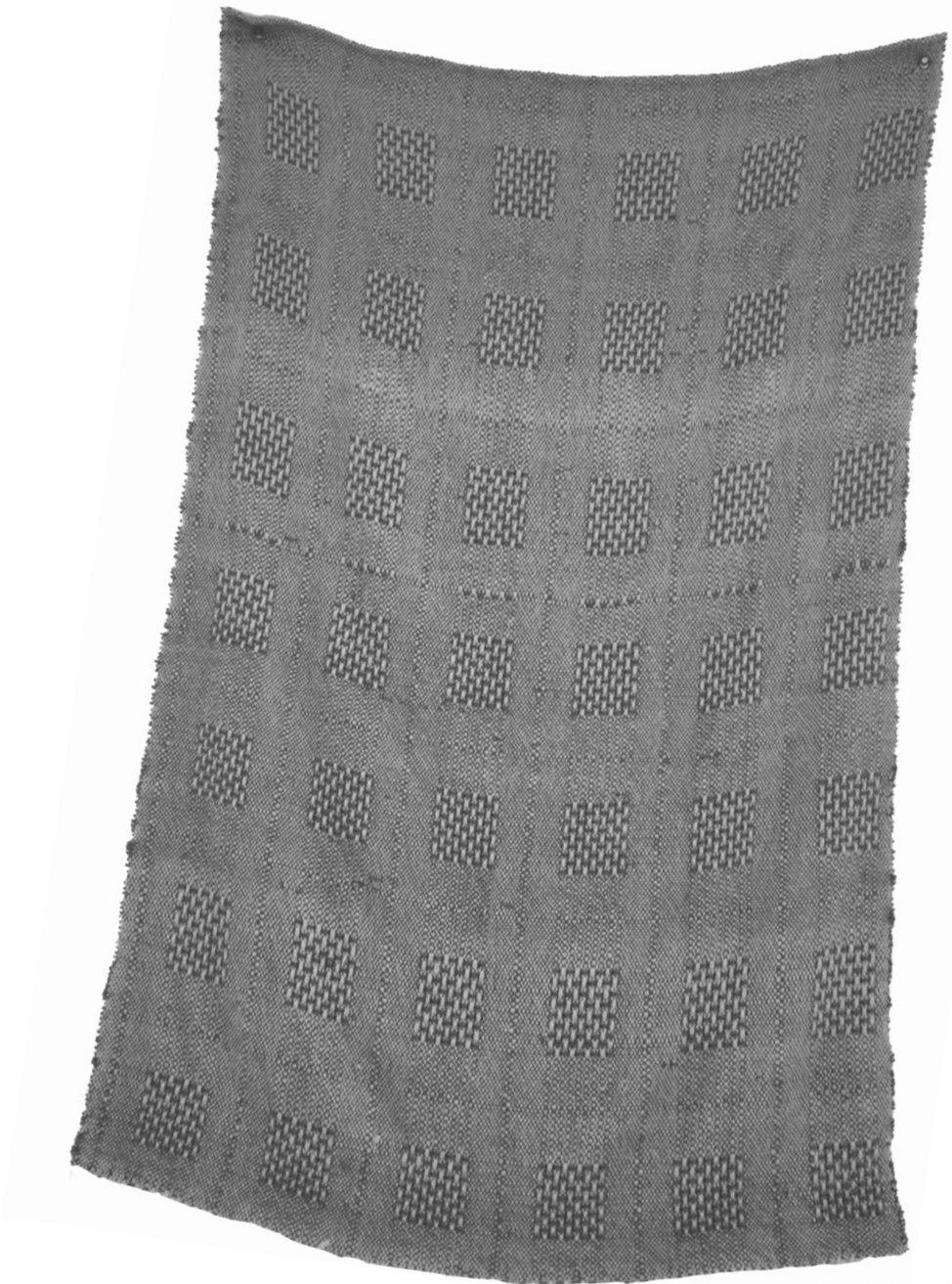


Image by Haley Johnson

Getting wheeled up to the psych ward is like that beginning sequence in a concert documentary where you follow the star through the bowels of the arena to the stage, but sad. A nurse moved me from one drab, tiled hallway to the next as we made our way up to 3 East. With each leg, I let a little more go. Bye resistance. Bye dignity. Bye working so fucking hard to keep myself from going back to the hospital. Going into treatment felt like coming out of some sort of prolonged lobotomy. The blankness I felt by the time we came to the double doors left me smiling.

During my first ten day long institutionalization, I probably smiled a total of fifteen times. The first thing I did at the hospital was to sob in front of twenty other fuckups and their therapists. As I hyperventilated my way through my introduction, I looked around the circle at their colorful, plastic chairs, then out the window at the world I'd so abruptly been barred from. My goal from day one was to get out. Staying would mean admitting that I had failed to take control of my narrative.

I don't remember when it started, but at some point I started narrating my own life to myself in my head like an autobiography. Whether or not I counted an experience of mine as pathetic depended largely on whether or not I could fashion it into dryly humorous prose. I could almost hear the amorphous sound of my voice reading this non-existent prose several years later at a hip bookstore meet and greet, like someone yelling garbled words in a dream. It was my own neverending, sinister free credit on Audible.

The part about OCD was already written for me when I got to it. I was five. I paused the Dora the Explorer three times to go wash my hands, and I knew I was doomed. Walking back into the living room the third time was like walking into uncanny valley. The swirly designs on the rug started to look computerized. My parents looked at me like I was a criminal. There is no way to tell when the inception of "things changing" was, but I know that after that day I was at the mercy of my bizarre, repetitive thoughts and the host of remedies that my parents employed to erase them. Every time I refrained from snipping invisible ribbons in the air, I got a gold star sticker on my OCD chart. Every time I couldn't control horrible visions of stabbing my family in the middle of the night, I got a stern talking to. My OCD story ended in the same quietly destructive way it had started. My parents told me I couldn't see my therapist anymore because she wanted to give me drugs, and I was crushed. She had wanted to hear about how painful it was to imagine these violent things against my will, and now nobody did. I would adapt. If I had a problem, it would be anything but perverted, ugly OCD.

Everything was fine until 11th grade when I was sitting in *Our Town* rehearsal, hazy from Abilify, delivering Mrs. Gibbs's lines about going to Paris like a bad casting temp reading at an audition. Listening to myself catatonically speak was a sure sign that my social identity good grades, friends, whatever had melted in a depression garbage fire. One of the worst things about this depression was that it severely impacted my performance and thus my narrative of self. At that time, *performance* and *narrative of self* were interchangeable for me. In high school, I relied upon the narrative control I had in plays. Theater was the respite I needed from my inability to sit with myself without picking at her. Onstage, I could connect to everything ugly, but I could aestheticize it through performance. I could release it in a way that was choreographed and cathartic. When I got depressed, I was so swarmed by gloom that I didn't have the ability to convert the ugliness. I was just drowning in it, lethargically miming corn shucking and oatmeal cooking as Thornton Wilder's American masterpiece required me to do.

The depression garbage fire was actually just obscuring a taller, more toxic OCD garbage fire a few miles away. At that time, my intrusive thoughts concerned my being an unfuckable, awkward, inadequate nothing baby. In the fall of junior year, my best friend started dating the boy I was in love with, which was what we in improv like to call an extreme "heighten." The self beratement and depression became so unbearable that I stopped being able to function. My parents and therapist decided that I had to take time off from school and go to a residential therapy program for severely depressed teenagers.

Luckily, I lived only twenty minutes away from McLean Hospital, where the program was housed. If you've read The *Bell Jar*, you might recognize McLean as the hospital where Sylvia Plath got electroshock therapy. If you've seen *Girl, Interrupted*, you may recognize it as the hospital where Winona Ryder's character is sent after her suicide attempt. My point is that this mental hospital is a cultural landmark, a fact that I now frequently wield for social capital when the fact that I have been institutionalized comes up. Being in the hospital felt like a fluke assignment. On some level, I knew that I was in the wrong place because I was in the wrong treatment. The therapy I was doing was for general depression, and I was learning zero strategies for managing my spiraling, intrusive OCD thoughts. On a conscious level, however, I was convinced that a person like me did not belong in the program. The other patients, I disgustingly convinced myself, were actual problem children for whom moving between adolescent residential programs was the norm. I tried to frame what was happening in a way that made sense to me. In my room during free time, I took out my journal and wrote:

I am in the fucking hospital. I feel like Piper Chapman.

Okay, yeah, that could be my hospital identity. In the TV show *Orange is the New Black*, which was all the rage in 2013, white entrepreneur Piper Chapman gets yanked from her brownstone and thrown in prison for trafficking drugs in her Smith days. After nights and nights of crying, Piper immerses herself in prison life and eventually works her way into a clique with her ex, who is also in prison? I can't remember. But. The wrongfully imprisoned Type A. Off the charts problematic and right in my wheelhouse.

To my advantage, the structure of the program gave me a clear trajectory for proving wellness (read: superiority via downward comparison). Patient progress was measured through a merit based levels system. Everyone started on Level Two, and as you demonstrated investment and active participation in group and individual treatment, you moved up levels. This meant gaining privileges: Level Three's could go out to restaurants on weekends, when there was no programming. Level Four's could leave campus to visit friends and family. The way to move up levels was to be on your best behavior, and the higher up you moved, the more apt a candidate for discharge you seemed. I was great at seeming great, so I turned on the charm. I treated group therapy like it was AP English, giving my most thoughtful comments about the teenage ethos while we discussed the toxic high school friendships that made my peers suicidal. I never complained when we had to turn the TV off at night, and I volunteered to give new admits the tour of the snack cabinet. I lead daily goal setting group with the congeniality of Tracy Flick from *Election* on a mood stabilizer. "We look forward to seeing Gabi as president of the United States," beamed the head of the program as I set down my expo marker at the end of the meeting, leading everyone in a rousing round of applause for me/his ability to teach marketable interpersonal skills to the troubled youth. I breezed through levels like some of the longer term patients breezed through Mario Kart levels every night in the game room. After ten grueling days, I finally got released and went back to school, feeling like raw hell as I prepared to kill it in *Pippin*.

One morning before school, right after I left McLean, I was crying hysterically in the shower. I felt like I had a medicine ball in my stomach. Suck it back suck it back. Holding down a deluge of despair in an effort toward continuation. *And that was when I turned it around*, the autobiography said. I decided it was over, so it was over.

Joan Didion famously said, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live." My slight, context dependent amendment to that would be that we tell our therapists stories in order to collaboratively maintain a tragically beautiful self image. The summer after freshman year of college, when all the same things were still wrong, I took my mom to coffee and tearfully told her that I felt a deep disconnect with intimacy and sex. I needed to be in therapy, which I hadn't been in since McLean. We brainstormed options. A family friend knew a cool therapist from when she got raped in her Brown days. I set up a session and felt hopeful.

A year into phone sessions with my therapist, I realized I had been sexually assaulted the summer before college. I was very relieved. *This* was an explanation with huge, ancient implications I was part of a whole community and history of pain, not just a weird anomaly. I had been stewing in this nondescript melancholia, and now there was a whole fucked up history to analyze. That summer I saw my therapist three times a week. Each session, we rehashed a different episode of abuse that had occurred two summers before, reframing what I'd been through in an antiparallel narrative. Then she'd send me off with a semi-satisfying takeaway about why "assholes are seductive," one I'd mull over to *Exile in Guyville* as I drove home. I figured that if I collected enough mini revelations, I'd get to the big one that would make me comfortable with my past and decisions and body and sexuality and selfhood. When I wasn't in therapy, I was running around the Chestnut Hill reservoir. Fast. Daydreams of burning down my rapist's house and snapping his guitar fueled me through miles. I ran around and around and around.

Seven months later I couldn't leave my bed. It was fine because I looked like shit and who wants to see that? I was weeks overdue with scripts for creative writing classes but

there was nothing in my psyche that wasn't too humiliating to let see the light of day, so I didn't write. No use in turning my redundant pain into a one act play, it was just too ugly. In fact, it was all irredeemably ugly. When the school year wrapped up, I began to pursue dying. With this I was creative. I faked out falling onto scissors, teased walking into oncoming traffic. I floored the gas and swerved in an intersection before pulling into the parking lot of a children's swim school and placing my first ever suicide hotline call. Every morning, I dumped a pile of Prozac into my hand and dove into it face down, mouth open. I let the pills stick to my lips before spitting them back into the bottle. I never went through with it. I did take a few dramamine pills though. My dad told me to call poison control.

"What's going on?" said the lady on the other end of the line. She sounded like that cute girl in AT&T commercials who says "psst, over here" to customers in the tech store and lets them in on the secret of AT&T's very affordable monthly plan.

"Hey, sooo, I swallowed some dramamine," I said breezily.

"Why?"

"Um..."

"Why?"

"I don't super want to be here."

"You need to go to the emergency room."

"Like, now?"

"You need to go to the emergency room."

"Okay." I hung up and went back to googling "reasons to live."

Twenty four hours later, I was at the Newton Wellesley Hospital low acuity psychiatric unit.

Around 8:15 that first night, I'd reached my daily limit for tolerating existence and went to my room. Alone, my self-beratement intensified. Self loathing thoughts stacked in my head like bricks. I sat under my paper thin covers and let it happen for several minutes. Then I took out the novel I'd been reading, hoping it would make me want to kill myself less.

I'd been doing a lot of impulse book buying in the weeks leading up to the ward. During that period, I was in the business of obsessively trying to remind myself that I a) still had a functioning intellectual brain and b) wasn't utterly isolated in my feeling that everything was lost. I turned to my old method of trying to find texts in which I could lose myself (or what was left of myself) for respite. One hot day in late May, I was wandering the streets of downtown Boston, zonked out on my own brain chemicals like a less stylish Olsen twin circa 2008. I stumbled into a used bookstore and found a book devastating enough for me to relate to: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer. Oh, Jonathan Safran Foer, the Jewish fiction wunderkind that I would never be, especially now that I was, as my father put it, "troubled." I sat next to some stoners in Boston Common and intently read the part of the book where the kid's dad dies in 9/11, furiously doing the mental math to analogize his pain and mine. *I too have experienced a shock of losing the self deeper and more seismic than any loss I have known before, and who knows whether I will come back from it*. That was the extent of my ridiculous, self aggrandizing analogy, and I knew it. Still, I read on, hoping I would find any resonance in this story that was fundamentally nothing like mine. I needed a sign that what I was going through symbolized something. That way, I would find my story beautifully tragic enough to be worth continuing.

That night in my hospital bed, I picked up where I'd left off, annotating the text with the pen I'd used to fill out my intake forms. I underlined places where the narrator said "I" and interpreted in the margins, trying to sound like I was still smart. *What is "I?" loss = fracture of I = can you reclaim "I" once you know it is disruptable national trauma and national "I" disruption. 9/11 is so sad.* 9/11 was so. Sad. Oh my god. The level of loss. So dark. I thought about it and felt like I'd just sipped bleach. My whole body was in pain. I had to put the book away. I took out the blue spiral notebook I'd brought with me and turned to journaling. If I couldn't find myself in a text, my plan B was to start writing my autobiography while institutionalized. A bestseller from the depths. *Literary theory teaches us that the self…* I stopped writing. I'd pick it up in the morning. I was too stupid to talk about that shit anyways.

The next day was a Saturday, so there was no therapy programming, and I had all the time in the world to write. I sat down at the long table in the day room, opened my notebook up to that same page, and brainstormed to the background noise of Chip and Joanna Gaines on HGTV. *Literary theory teaches us…* No. I had to stop. I put the notebook away and started reading an issue of *People*. Well, first I tried to read an essay collection they had in the day room, which was a bunch of feminist scholars on 9/11. Then I got too sad again and read People. I didn't pick up the notebook again the whole time I was there.

Sometimes several connected events occur and we arrive at the intersection of those events much later and all at once. In the fall of 2018, I took a literary theory class and read "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" by the theorist Jacques Derrida for the first time. In "Structure, Sign, and Play," which was given as a speech at the 1966 MLA conference, Jacques Derrida renounces structuralism and the rules it imposes upon thinking and reading (not that he like, invented any of these ideas). He explains that up until the fateful event of his speech, every discourse in the human sciences had been tethered to the practice of finding a center: the irreducible kernel of truth at the apex of all interpretation. Some examples of the center: God, your childhood trauma, the smallest atomic particle. The center is the idea underneath it all that tells us our stories make sense the "why" that we yearn for. Our stories don't make sense, so the center is a trick of the eye. You can see whole narrative arcs where there's only stasis, because the center projects illusions and the promise of a release. In this way, the center is a home base that can't support the weight of the things that really happen to us, or the way that they happen.

Derrida says, "In order not to short change the form and movement of the myth, that violence which consists in centering a language which is describing an acentric structure must be avoided" (Derrida, 1966). You can only avoid this violence if you dedicate yourself to moving through your life, regardless of whether or not it looks like you thought it would. This means responding openly to the unwieldy, stupid ways life moves you. The modus operandi of open response is "freeplay." Freeplay is enabled through accepting that your life isn't *supposed* to mean anything (after all, no center), so you're allowed to respond to it however you want.

Derrida ends by saying he has no idea what it will be like to carry on without the center, but promises that carving an acentric path will be either glorious, ugly, or both. Through freeplay, you can get crafty and welcome the violence in gorgeous ugly ways.

I, or some version of me, knew I had to give up on finding meaning in the horrible shit that had been happening for so long. Why this was all happening and what it made me look like to the rest of the world was irrelevant. The shape of my narrative was irrelevant. If I wanted to want to live again, I would have to be the active player in my story and stop self-ironizing. It was only hurting me to view my healing from a critical distance.

Sitting in my apartment, I knew that I had just read something I needed to know. Sitting in the day room, I understood it as a challenge. But I didn't put all this together until much later.

I fumbled my way through a new approach.

Stupid joy was a good way in. A few days into my institutionalization, my friend Lauren and I were sitting on the patio during Fresh Air time. Fresh Air time was the daily fifteen minute slot when we were allowed to go outside to the gated rooftop patio. It was sunny out, which made for some nice shadows on the brutalist concrete. Suddenly, Lauren, who was always stretching, did a backbend. The nine year old failed gymnast in me was jealous and delighted. It was Stick-It perfection.

"Dude. That's like, an amazing backbend."

"Thanks. Yeah I used to do gymnastics."

"For real? Like, how seriously?"

"Aly Raisman and I had the same coach."

"Holy shit that's amazing."

Lauren started to cry. I looked at her, then looked down, then looked at her.

"It's just like, it could have been I'm just thinking about how it could have been and its whatever." She wiped a tear from under her glasses. Tears kept coming, but she sucked them back with little sniffles.

I understood. I was probably too fucked up to ever perform again because if I ever had to do method acting I would only have this humiliating experience to draw on, and then I would hate acting and quit performing. I had basically already quit performing when I decided to not go to school for theater. Everything I was a part of made me so unhappy, and *I* had decided to be there. *I* was the one who begged my mom to sign me up for that horrible sleepaway camp. If I hadn't gone to summer camp and gotten bullied by those girls I would have been happier and fucked more people cause I wouldn't have been so ashamed of my body. I had fucked up every pivotal narrative checkpoint. Whatever. That backbend was so sick. Lauren looked so cool in the sun, just moving her body playfully. I asked her to do it again. She was too upset.

Something changed on the roof. I could breathe a little more. It happened again in arts and crafts group. If you've been to a psych ward, you know that arts and crafts is desperately employed to placate people who really need to be in intensive therapy at all hours when there are no therapists on the unit. Historically, I am

quick to emotionally withdraw from group therapy activities. That day, however, I was so hopeless that I felt compelled to invest I needed a break from regretting literally everything I had ever done on repeat in my head. I waited for instructions at the group activity table, which was prepped with magic markers and paper.

"Everyone. Today, we are making gratitude charts," said Jess the social worker with a cloying smile. She took off her Lululemon warm-up jacket. Just a quick pop-in to help the deranged after her jog.

"A gratitude chart is where you draw a circle, or any shape of your choosing, and write the things you are grateful for in the middle, or coming off of the sides, like a sun."

Jess pressed a button on her boom box and knockoff Enya began to play. This was our cue to begin. After a couple minutes of dodging thoughts about how I had nothing to be grateful for because I had ruined my whole life and needed to keep reminding myself so that I could stay on my toes and make sure it didn't happen again, I tried to access a sense of gratitude. I started with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (food, water, shelter) because that's low hanging fruit. The visual of Crayola ink dancing across a page was kind of comforting. I looked up. Everyone around me was smiling and drawing like they were using markers for the first time and it made me incredibly angry. Being angry gave me a stomachache. I turned back to the paper.

What actually mattered right now? Maybe another way into this was thinking outside of my ruined ego. I visualized brushing it aside like it was a big stone blocking a cave. Almost instantly, I realized that so many people in my life were working so hard to hold me together. My friends picked up every time I called from the payphones in the hall. Sometimes, they even went through the front desk and the *you are placing a call to a patient at the Newton Wellesley low acuity psych ward* voice message to get to me. My mother, whom I had terrified and traumatized, visited every single day. I filled in about half the circle. It was not revelatory. I was hopeful. I hadn't been hopeful in five months.

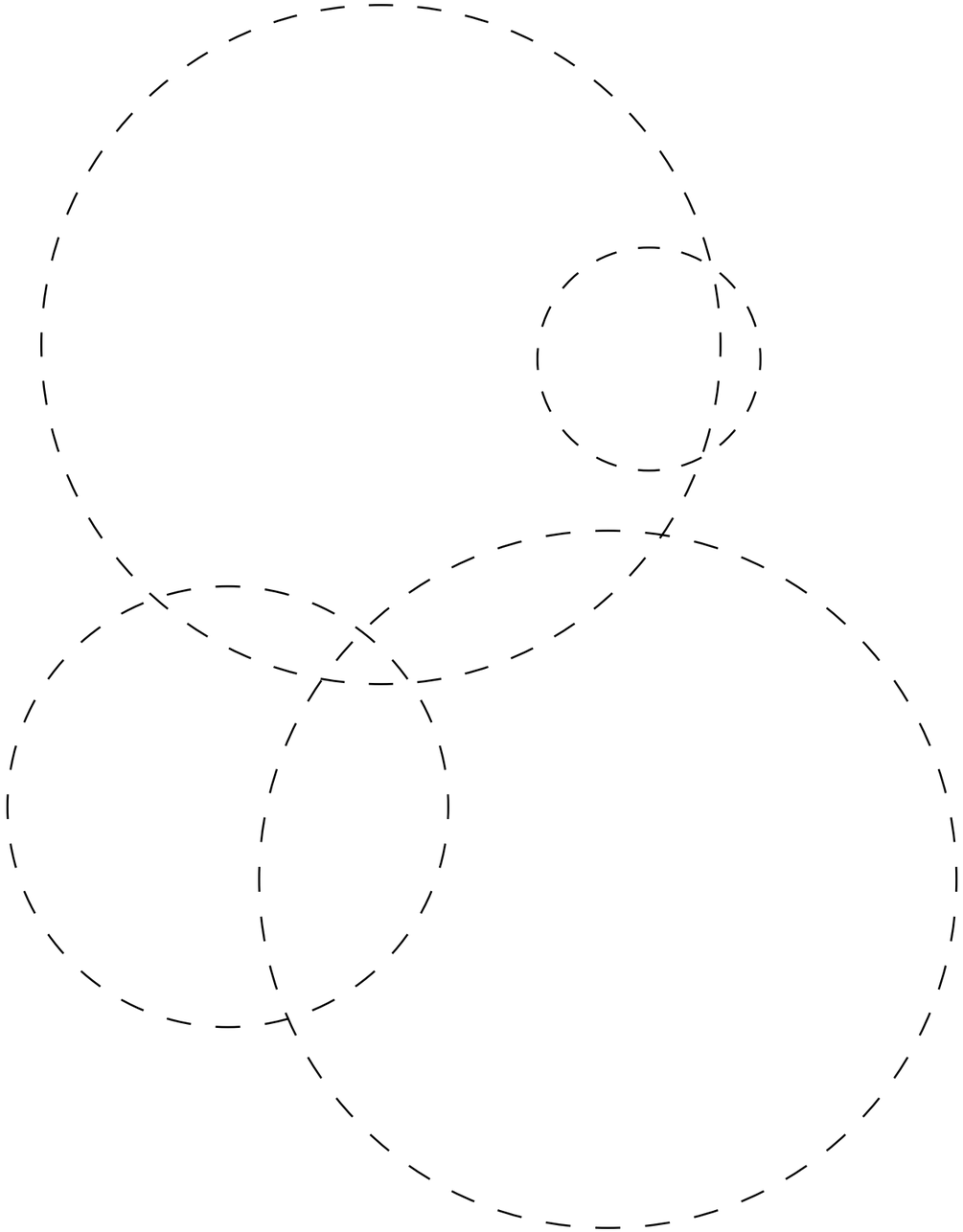
Arts and crafts were not Jess's only trade. She also led low impact aerobics once a week. This sounded like a nightmare to me, but I was beginning to worry all my muscles would atrophy from sitting so much, so I went. Aerobics was held in the common space between the high acuity ward (for psychosis and related disorders) and the low acuity ward (for depression-and-anxiety). The turnout was surprisingly high. Everyone was wearing colorful sweats, which looked especially bright under the fluorescents. Jess walked in with an iPhone speaker. "Alright everybody, you ready to move?" she said, looking none of us in the eye. She turned on "Everything Now" by Arcade Fire and started us with very slow marching. "Right then left, everyone!" It was helpful that she was telling us which foot was right and which was left, because I forgot.

When I looked around after the Arcade Fire song, the crowd had thinned out significantly. Behind us, someone laughed. It was a patient from the other ward.

"You guys look fucking dumb!" he yelled. We did.

I wanted to leave. So badly. No one was blocking the powered-off TV at the front of the room anymore, so I could see my whole reflection. My hair was in a greasy ponytail. I looked sedated. I would have kept cruelly ogling myself but then "Can't Stop the Feeling" by Justin Timberlake came on and everyone started doing grape vines and ski jumps. The fray was moving faster around me, multicolored sneakers traveling from side to side.

A deeply specific humiliation set in. It was like I was simultaneously participating in every dance class warm up that had ever made me want me to exit my skin. Like theater troupe when I was ten. Ten years of maturity down the drain. Mortifying body. My sad stupid situation floored me as Jess yelled "come on!" Do something. I was going to die because I was going to live. Like when you have to stay awake for so long that it hurts. There was no way to un-live what I had lived. No beautiful tragedy. Assault was a cop-out, McLean was a cop-out, and this was the rock bottom truth of how fucking pathetic I was. It was so embarrassing. No community of heroes here. *Nothing I can see but you when you dance dance dance dance* fuck you, Justin. Don't look at me. So sad and ugly with a horrible autobiography I couldn't un-write. Stomach ache. *Dance dance dance dance*. No way to have a narrative I was even remotely okay with unless I did something to advance it. Evil catch 22. Agonizing dissonance between the ugliness that happened and the rest that I didn't know yet. I had lost everything. Ugly lights. Everyone's faces so sad and ugly. Guilt and no art. I ski jumped. I had nowhere else to be. This was the only place on Earth I could be. I ski jumped. I had nothing. Nothing. Fuck it. •



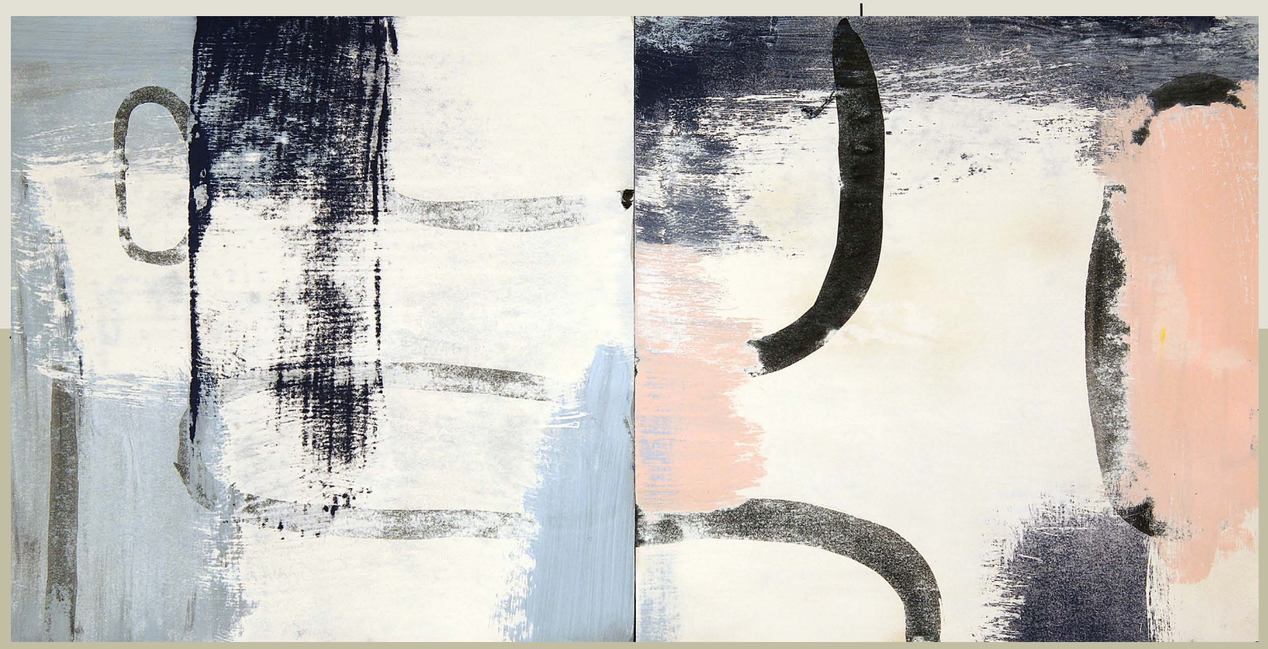
INTERLUDE

Rachel Weinstein

Benjamin Stevens

Amanda Poorvu

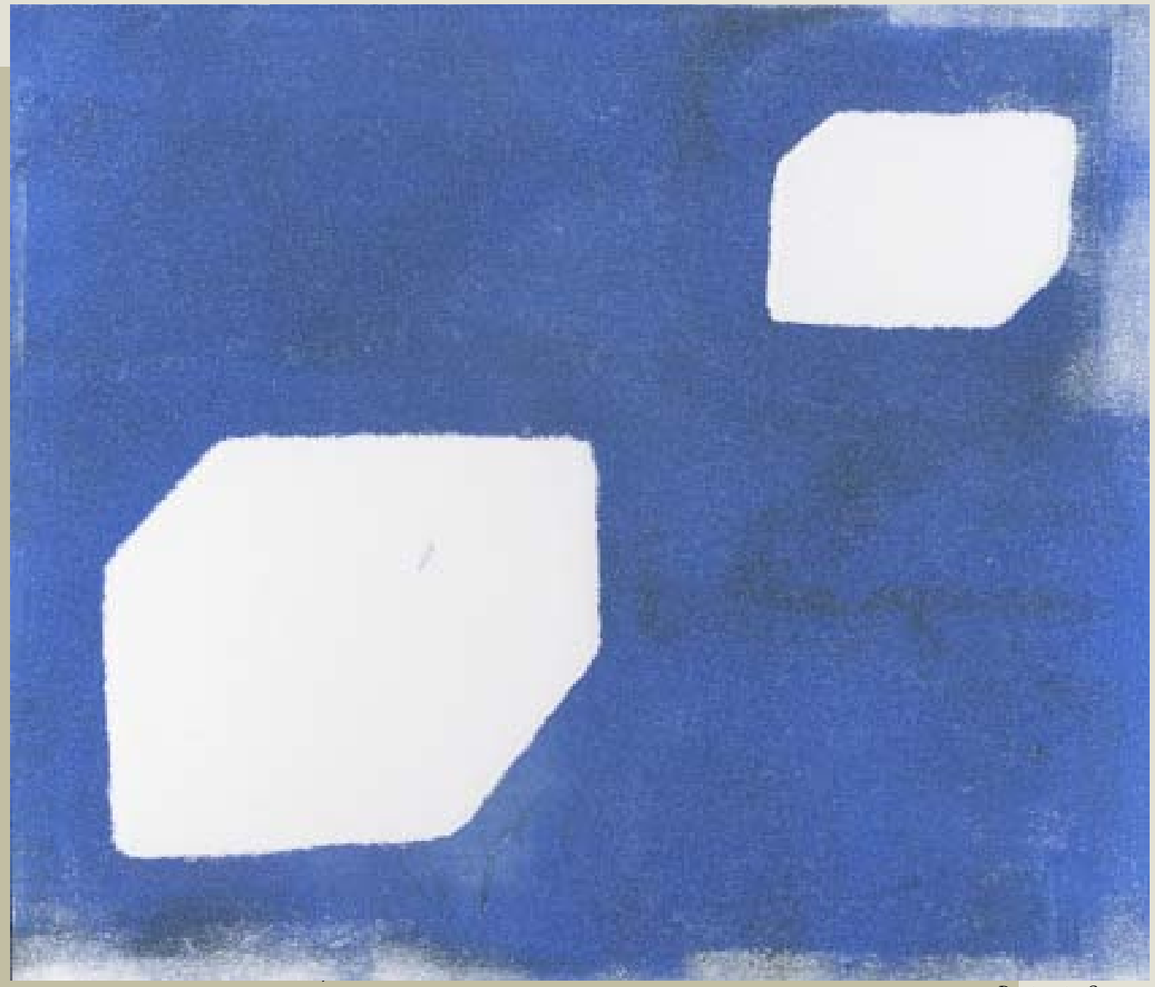
Benjamin Stevens



Amanda Poorvu

Rachel Weinstein

Rachel Weinstein



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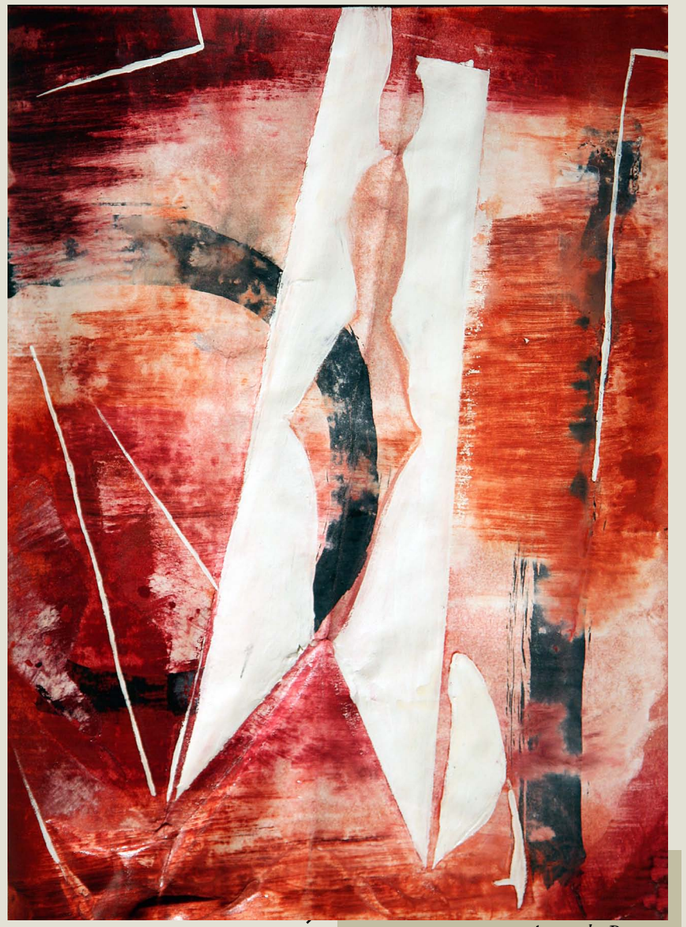


Amanda Poorvu

RACING LIKE TURTLES

ZANE MARKOSIAN

In the morning the air smelled hot and a little bit smokey. I rolled over next to Kirby, in the large and plump bed of the "second house." We were in the smaller house that had been built years earlier—next to the real cabin—in order to provide more sleeping space at the lake.

The real cabin was like walking into a relic of the 1950s and like a hastily put-together set for a vacation dream. It was built of logs and the walls labored under the weight of the kitschy decoration, sagging all around the main room. There were snowshoes and replica skis and fishing poles and old coca-cola ads. There were also amusingly raunchy posters for movies from the 80s and more than one stylized "gone fishing" sign.

I stepped out onto the porch, eager to get into the real cabin because I didn't want to miss any summer revelry. The screen door slammed behind me as I walked into the other house and looked for signs of life. I didn't really expect anyone to be awake though.

The day before, we had all driven across the state in order to get to Simone's cabin, and we had spent far too many hours on the tiny gravel roads of eastern Washington. We were staying at Simone's cabin in the Okanogan and we were celebrating the end of highschool. This was our big grownup vacation and we were lucky enough to be living in temporary opulence. She had driven over a day before us all in order to unboard the windows and to get the cabin ready for the summer.

Hayden, Kerry, and Dory all drove up in a red pickup truck with a canoe in the back, and myself Kirby, Emily, and Patrick followed. Emily had been trying to play the most summery pop music that she could find, and as we bounced over dusty hill, Patrick and I boldly made up words to the sections that we didn't know

It turns out that it's very difficult to find a one specific valley in the middle of the Okanagan region. At the top of one pass, we had come to a t-intersection and Emily directed Kirby to the left but he hesitated. The road was cordoned off and a Forest Service ranger explained that because of a forest fire, we would have to make a detour. One other fire-induced detour like this one and a handful of more self-imposed navigation errors meant that it was late in the day by the time that we finally arrived.

I remember almost falling out of the car when we pulled up the cabin—I was so desperate to stretch out and I was eager to take in the surroundings. We were at the end of a narrow valley and steep hills rose on either side. Behind the houses there were woods, but it was dusk and it was difficult to see much beyond the immediate and pine scented clearing. The other car—with Hayden, Dory, and Kerry—had arrived hours before us because somehow they hadn't been as messed up by the detours, and everyone rushed down to greet us and to welcome us to summer.

Standing there in the garishly decorated kitchen, I was so eager to get my friends up-and-going. I felt this restless urgency as I squinted through the window, but there really was no prescribed plan. I opened up a package of bacon while I peered through the decades-old panes of glass above the kitchen sink, and I watched some birds swooping across the lake.

It was really more of a pond than a lake. A dam had been added in the 50s in order to create a reservoir for fishing. Back then, this whole place had been a fishing retreat. It was rented to wealthy businessmen coming from Seattle or Spokane. But that business had dried up (though the reservoir remained), and Simone's dad had bought the land in the 90s and built another cabin as well as a little garden plot.

We ate a breakfast that was almost entirely bacon and fruit, and we headed down to join the birds at the lake.

Down by the water, the noise was incredible. There was a constant hum of activity: cicadas in the reeds, mosquitoes hovering around our ears, dragonflies snapping their wings. In some effort to banish all this chaos, Simone brought down a speaker. She put on The Shins and we listened in the sun.

You led no celibate life
No skirt while chemicals danced
in your head
You stole the keys to this ride
And your fables are falling tonight

It was almost noon at this point and I was recovering from what had turned into a race against Patrick. We had set off leisurely at first from the edge of the dock. We pushed into the cool black water and towards the far edge of the pond. I looked at him between strokes – alternating my head left and right with each motion of the arms. His shoulders bulged and even in that dusty afternoon it had been clear that he was a strong swimmer. I felt my heart pounding. We sometimes found ourselves competing viciously with each other and I never understood why. The calls from the dock came to us in between our strokes.

"Whoever gets to other side first can have my second Mike's…"

"You can't let him beat you like that…"

Patrick pulled forward a bit and I kicked harder. In an instant I was so mad. As I pulled the water past me I couldn't help but catalog all the times that he had made people laugh more than I had. And I thought about the undefined—and yet dire—feelings of competition that whirled between the two of us when others were around.

Oftentimes, I brushed these feelings away with thoughts that it didn't matter, that it was immature to even care what people thought about the two of us, that maybe no one else but me and Patrick sensed this silent perpetual war. But in the water, I could think of nothing else.

With a frenzied splash we both smacked the cliff of the other side. It had been an almost exact tie and the anger was all gone. We bobbed laughing, gasping for breath, and treading water. In a good-natured manner, we fought to shove each other into the rock and I laughed as I felt the cool stone scrape my shoulder and saw small streaks of blood on his. I felt big and I knew that he did too. We swam back together, laughing. Later we would split the promised Mike's hard lemonade and then have two more together.

Emily lay down next to me on the edge of my towel. She curled her wet back over towards me and our arms pushed against each other. I twisted my own body a little bit to my right, away from her. My shoulder left the damp towel and rested on the wooden dock which felt like a thousand degrees. The white, rough wood had been catching the sun all day and it was hard to even walk across barefooted at this point. Still though, it felt okay against the back of my shoulder which was damp from the swim. In middle school I had had a little crush on Emily but now that we were older, and had grown into markedly different people, it felt natural to just be friends.

Simone sat next to us on the dock but because I lay on my back, it almost felt like Simone was sitting above me, hanging over my head. She flipped a page of her book. Without raising my head to look to the water, I kept track of Kirby and Dory as they paddled in a canoe around the little lake. They were circumnavigating it all and they were paddling lazily. In my hand I grasped the now-lukewarm last drops of a Mike's and the sweetly smell of that drink mixed with the intoxicating smell of Emily's hair.

Suddenly Simone shrieked and tumbled onto myself and Emily. She had—in an instant—drawn her feet out of the water (they had been dangling) and she laughed as she recovered her balance.

"It was a turtle! A huge turtle just swam up and rubbed against my toe – are there more?"

We pulled ourselves up and bent over the dock. "Oh wow there's another one... and a couple more!" Emily exclaimed while pointing out towards the center of the water. "They're fast!"

"What happened?" Kirby called to us as the canoe slipped easily up against the dock. We hadn't even noticed him and Dory paddle over, attracted by the wild shriek.

Mischievously, Dory reached down for a small net which lay in the bottom of the canoe and she asked "want to try to catch one?" Of course we did.

Kirby excitedly declared "Someone can come into the canoe with us and we can paddle while you use the net, and someone else can sit on the surfboard and help us corral one of these turtles.

I pushed the surfboard off of the sand and I sat towards the back, with the front angling up and out of the water. I watched Simone precariously lower herself off the dock and into the waiting canoe. We were set.

Leaning over to put my chest against the board and my face close to the water, I was able to move forward by drawing my arms through the water. We were so effortlessly quiet—on the surfboard and in the canoe—as we smoothed over the water. The cicadas had persisted and now that The Shins were no longer playing, the late afternoon had become loud and chaotic. But it was much quieter in the center of the pond.

"There's one!" I called to the others.

They circled gracefully over to my side. "Oh I see it!" But as they drew closer, the turtle startled and dived deeper. We followed in the direction in which the turtle had seemed to shoot himself and the four of us saw him surface a couple yards ahead of us.

Breathing softly so as to not disturb anything I said "I'll circle around him and try to direct the turtle to you all.

Dory back paddled in order to slow the advancing canoe, and I turned my board and pushed towards the center of the pond. I rounded back towards the reeds, keeping the turtle on my right side.

"Okay I see him." Simone crouched in the center of the canoe and reached the net above her head. "What's our plan?" She asked.

"Let's get a bit closer," Kirby answered, "and then go for it." "Zane, if it comes to you, you might have to use your hands."

I really didn't know if I would be able to touch a real live turtle with my hands. Everything around us stood still for an instant and then Simone plunged the net down. There was a loud splash – followed by a quick scream: "he's coming to you, Zane!"

I swept my arm through the water, trailing a frothy disturbance behind my spread hand. I had completely missed and my hand swung up empty. The turtle had slid under my board and out to the other side.

The surface of the water became a chaotic frenzy as we all madly tried for the escaping turtle.But we finally got him. From the dock, Patrick, Hayden, and Emily whooped and cheered for us. Dory held her paddle above her head in triumph and Simone dropped the turtle into the base of the canoe. She was afraid of its snapping beak and so as soon as the turtle was extricated from the net, she let him fall.

This went on for hours. In all we probably caught about five poor turtles. At some point Kirby paddled back to the dock in order to grab Hayden's nalgene and he used the water bottle to scoop some pond water over the turtles in the bottom of the canoe.

Dory was done and while Kirby grabbed the nalgene, she climbed precariously out of

Image by Julia Friend

the boat and onto the dock. This led to a grand reshuffling: I stepped first onto the dock and then into the canoe, and Patrick—who until then had been sharing a Mike's with Emily—pushed himself onto the surfboard. I noticed that she touched his arm as he got up from the dock.

The two-craft flotilla set out for one last conquest. It was a waiting game and while we waited for the turtle to rise back towards the surface, we drifted towards the point that we had seen the turtle last. Then we tried to position our two crafts around the swimmer and we came to the critical moment.

Patrick paddled well on the surfboard and as I swept the net through the water (Simone and I were taking turns), Patrick back-paddled deftly. He could see that the turtle would startle and would shoot between the two of us. And he was right, the turtle darted away from the canoe and towards the center of the pond, and patrick was able to be exactly in the right place. He had timed it expertly.

From the splashing chaos, he drew his hand up. And in his hand, he held the turtle. He was triumphant – and he was the only one of us who had caught a turtle with his own fleshy hands. I had caught at least two with the net, but the net absolutely provided some kind of a distancing.

Patrick tossed the little guy into the canoe and simone scooped some more water to pour over the crawling mess of turtles. We had them all and we began paddling back. Not to the dock but, this time, to the beach. We pushed up the canoe and Patrick stepped up off the surfboard, into the shallow water.

I looked back to the beach and I saw Patrick greet Emily with a little smile plastered across his face. Just hours earlier we had been straining through the water side-by-side and I had been intent on beating him. Somehow it was always like this.

When we had been younger, a year-or-so before the cabin in the Okanagan, we had gone up to Lost Lake to spend the night. It was the most haphazard of plans – within a couple of hours, we all had decided we were going, packed some backpacks and set off. And the trip really had been driven by some summertime sense of audacity.

Our tents were on a tiny island in the middle of the lake, and there were narrow little planks going back to the shore, offering a muddy walkway. We wanted to do something big before dinner and so we slid across the planks back to the shore, and set off to circumnavigate the lake.

Almost halfway around we ran into a towering boulder sitting on the side of the water. Moss made a sheen all the way over the water side of the rock and I thought it was crazy to even consider us sliding past on that side. Instead I proposed that we head to the right—away from the water just a little bit—in order to get back around to the left and to get back to our dinner. Patrick balked and I remember myself immediately going on the defensive: "well what do you think we should do? Do you want to slip down the rock? Try to come up with a better plan."

He smirked. "All I know is that I don't think we need go all the way around."

We finally did go my way but it ended up being a much longer detour than it seemed. By the time that we made it back to the campsite it was dark, we were hungry, and I couldn't stop thinking about how smug Patrick must have been. Remembering back to that day, I'm not even sure that he had been gloating – but I remember thinking of the feud as inescapable.

It was this same strange resentment that floated over my head as I watched him hold a turtle out for our friends to inspect. I also felt a little bit bad for the turtle; his little legs spun, unproductively in the air and there was nothing else he could do.

Looking back into a boat full of desperate scrambling little amphibians, Simone had an idea. "What if we draw a line in the sand, release the turtles up there by the grass, and place bets as they run back into the water? I can take these ones." Simone pointed to the 3 turtles in the front of the boat. "And you guys can have these ones."

We all loved the idea. I had bent over to reach into the boat and, with a canoe paddle, started to shunt the remaining turtles away from the ones that Simone had claimed. Patrick had joined me by my right side.

"Let's call this one Escobar," he pointed to the biggest of our team.

"And let's call this one Julio," I answered.

Emily brought down some generously sized tupperwares from the kitchen and we had been using these to transport the turtles. I felt Escobar repeatedly throw himself against the side, in an effort to get out.

The day had become colder very quickly. As soon as the sun dipped behind the wall of the valley, it was as if a curtain had been drawn on the show. After spending hours laying on the scorching pale wood of the dock, I was actually chilly and so I was eager to get these turtles released and back into the water.

Opposite Simone, I scooped the first leathery turtle out of the "boys" team's

tupperware. Julio squirmed unexpectedly in my hand and I almost dropped him. I reached down and held him inches above the wet sand, watching his feet swirl through the air. He must have been so desperate to get back into the water. It didn't seem totally fair that we were forcing these turtles to race – especially when just an hour earlier they had been happily swimming.

We released the turtles in pairs. There were three races in total and each race was accompanied by screams and cheers from the two teams. The turtles scrambled headfirst towards the safety of the water—an instinct which must have been programmed deep in them.

Later that night, we sat around the table and laughed while picking over our remnants of dinner. The pasta was still in a bowl on the table in front of us and I set down my fork, in favor of –instead – just using my fingers to pick out some cherry tomatoes.

I think we were prouder of ourselves back then than we really deserved. Earlier Simone had worried about how salty the pesto should be because her mom usually made it one way. We were all still trying to be like the grownups. She licked her spoon and mused, "you know—I think we nailed it." Patrick reached across to give her a high-five and we all laughed.

We sat for awhile, content to just laugh and talk over the food on the table, but after while Kirby got up and he came back with a deck of cards. He dropped them on the table and suggested that we play hearts.

"Hearts, really?" Dory asked.

"Yeah—come, on let's okay," Patrick responded. Somehow it had become his idea, to play, and he grabbed the cards from Kirby to begin shuffling.

Hayden got up to clear the table and I slinked after him into the kitchen. "What is it with Patrick?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Hayden asked.

"Well I just feel like there's always something to prove."

"Are you guys still talking about the race?" Dory asked as she walked into the kitchen with a stack of bowls from the table.

I shot Hayden a grimace before heading back out to pick up more dishes.

When we were all back around the table, cards in hand, I looked down and realized that I could maybe shoot the moon. I worried about being too bold but there in front of me were the cards: a run of high hearts, some high diamonds, and the King of Spades. With a subtle little shrug of my head, I played my first card. Someone slipped in a low heart and I played everything off as if—"oh shucks I guess I can roll with that." But really I was thrilled.

Patrick reacted to me stomaching a heart and what he said was: "Oh yikes that's okay, Zane." But what I heard was "you must be so embarrassed."

Hearts is one of those games where points are bad—but what's special is that if you somehow have the gall to take every single point, then you actually win. This is what I was trying to do: take every single heart, as well as the queen of spades.

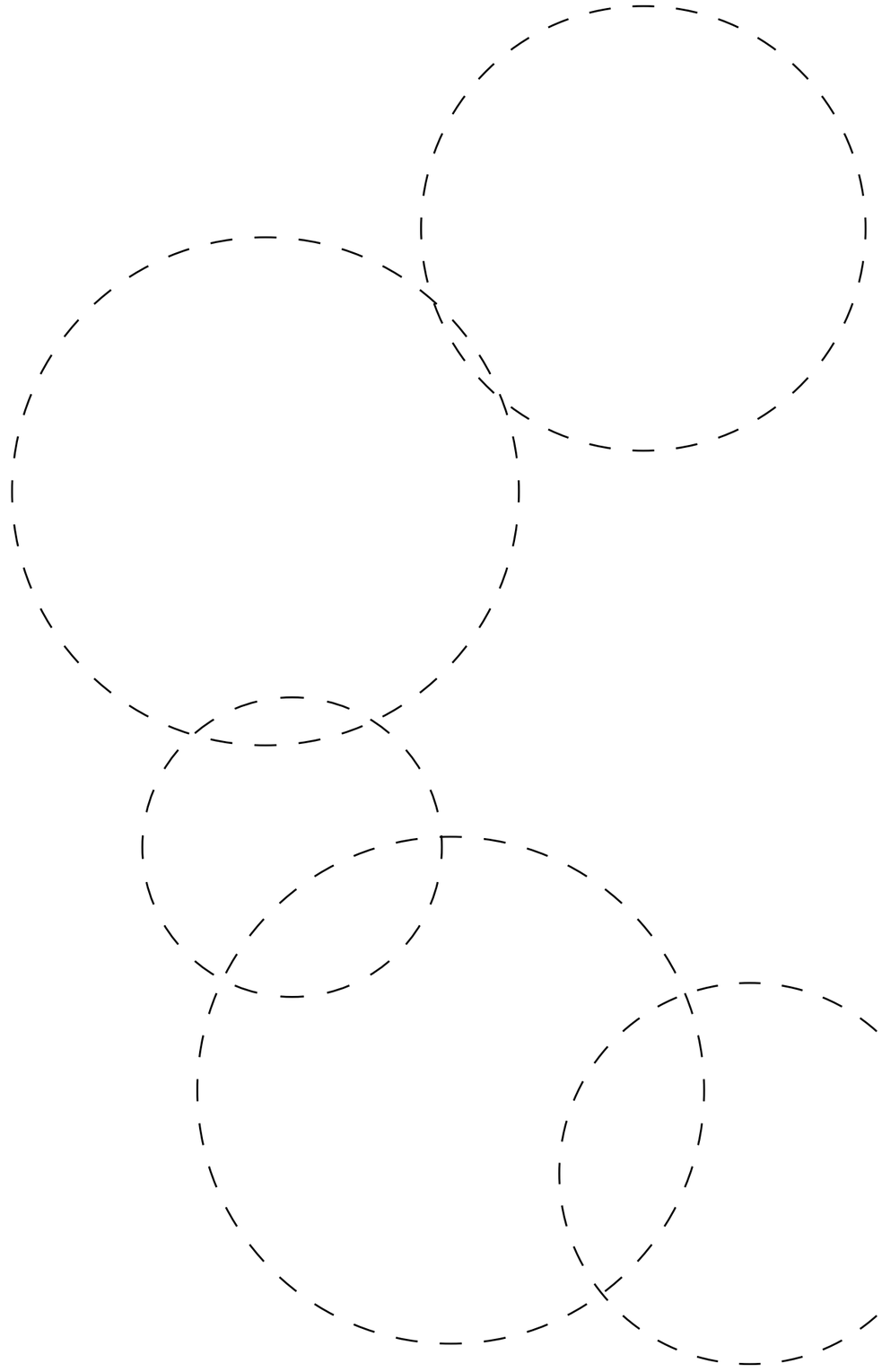
I tried to hide what I was doing. I asked Emily about her plans to run cross country in college in order to distract from my taking the eight of hearts. I asked Dory how she felt about moving to California while I took the four, two, and seven. I asked about the future because that was the biggest distraction that we all shared and I hoped to deflect from my plan until it was too late to be stopped.

But with every point I took, I felt little jabs from Patrick. Even though I wanted to keep my head down and to just play my cards, I couldn't help but to engage in the back-and-forth a little bit. Trick after trick, the two of us teased each other and tried to appear bigger than we actually were.

Simone put back on the Shins album that we had listened to earlier. As we went around the table, putting down cards and picking at food, Patrick and I kept making small comments. I was eager to laugh a little too loud when he spilled a Mike's and he was quick to teasingly ask me about how I had cried while cutting the onions for dinner. Our back-and-forth continued throughout the night. We were listening to the same song that we had been while down at the water. But this time a different part stood out to me.

The dust from a four day affair is
now landing
All over the floor and your brown
legs
The gold-plated legs of my rival
Whose eyes had no reason to fall

I still had those lines running through my head as a I fell asleep later that night, next to Kirby. I knew that in the morning we would wake up and do it all over again and the air would still be hot and smoky. We would still be wrapped up tight in the beginning of summer, and Patrick and I would still be racing, just like turtles. •



CASEY REDCAY

TRYPTICH FOR FAINTING ALONE

Even when I'm in the dark
I'm in the dark with you.
-Alice Fulton

1

Like an unlucky fish plucked from the blue
I imagine God tossed me
for a reason
a message shot straight through me
so that I'd fall to the floor and pay attention

2

when I was 15 I used to dream about fainting
into my Unbeknownst Beloved's arms
a plea for the fact of my existence
to be suddenly made obvious
I wanted helplessness
sinlessness, suddenly
made worth loving
I thought falling was a kind of worship
imagine my luck

3

now I faint alone, dumped onto the icy tile
wake up and the Dog stands over me asking
why are you so graceless
his scruffy visage now a tower
of white light forever •

DIRECT FLIGHT TO ORLANDO

Image by Clio Shwartz

We go down
into a land of swamp and ruffle

I hide in my middleness
overlookable, a noiseless witness
hanging over families
like a forgotten Mickey Mouse balloon

smiling though no one is paying me to
I am coming home, Orlando
he greets me:

a catcall
from a beat-up truck
snake tongue but slower

a voice that drags
like a stranger's hand on my back

I will come home to someone
my man is the one
who brings me hotel soap
shiny and papered
labeled
until placeless
piling on my shelf
my precious

my lonesome body
made clean
and still alone
but clean

my disaster spreading
like a suburban housing development
eating the land under us

spreading like the terror on his face
the man next to me stiffening
the air getting even staler
the plane rattling between clouds
his face squeezing like an orange
in an invisible fist
until we go down and
everything stops. •

THE ACT OF MAPPING THE SOUL

ELIANA CARTER

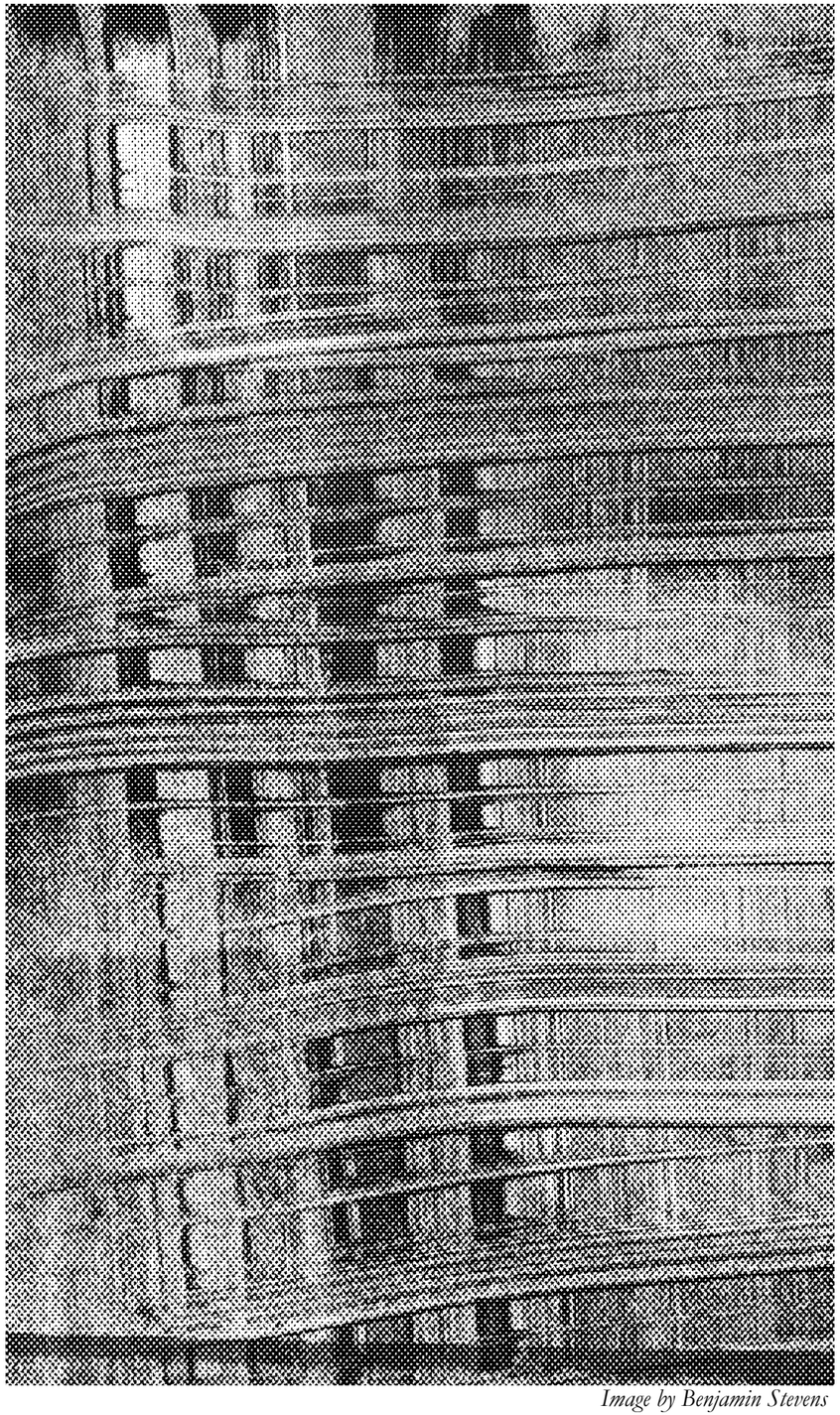


Image by Benjamin Stevens

Before I was born, a house fire destroyed most of my dad's family photos. His life has always been a bit of a mystery to me. Save for a wallet-sized photo of him when he was around seven years old, I have little idea what he even looked like as a kid or young adult. I know my grandparents and their families migrated from rural Louisiana to Oakland, California, before my father was born. They made their new life there, where my dad was raised. Too many relatives to count now call Oakland home.

Though my dad grew up in California, I am East Coast born and raised. Growing up, we'd board a plane every few years to visit his side of the family. Grandma would cook her famous gumbo on the stove, big pot boiling. Dungeness crab pulled from West Coast waters—a delicacy on our East Coast tongues. Each time I'd show up feeling like a new person, like a lifetime had passed. (If you ask them, they'll tell you I look the same, just taller.) There's always been this great distance between me and Oakland, both physically and temporally.

As I grew older, and tried to find my place in the world, understanding myself through my family history became more and more important. What were they like? What did they do? What was left behind in pursuit of Oakland? How far back can we trace my family's history? I sat down with my dad on Christmas to ask him what he knew. I wanted to finally learn about my family's history. I wanted to know why they moved, what kinds of stories he heard growing up. We sat down at the kitchen table. In a neighboring room my brother played Christmas tunes on the piano, while my mom read a novel on the couch. It was mid-afternoon, and our dinner was cooking in the oven. Soon we would be gathered around the table to eat, but first, I wanted to sit down and talk. Much to my dismay and surprise, he didn't know much. I didn't understand. How couldn't he?

In 1942, my family moved from rural Louisiana to Oakland, where my father was born and raised. I've never known much about what prompted this move. There was racism. They lived in fear. But that was all I heard. When I ask my dad about why his parents and siblings uprooted and transported their home some 2,000 miles West, he doesn't know much either. He is able to re-tell me the story that his uncles had told him. One day, a group of white men come knocking on his grandfather's door in rural Louisiana.

My dad tells me,

> *So they came to him and they said, 'We saw your son,' which was my father, 'With a mule down by the water,' and they said, 'You know we could have killed him right there but we didn't. We didn't do anything to him.' They went on to tell him about all the other members of the family and how they had observed them and that they were just letting him know that if he didn't do what they were asking, they would have trouble. That's the time when they left the farming life and moved into the city.*

So they packed up and moved. I can only assume this was merely one of many instances of racialized violence my family was faced with in Louisiana. My great-uncles told my dad this story; his parents wouldn't. For my grandparents, the terrors of the South were a dark secret to be kept hidden away from the light. The trauma they endured was to be left there: in the past. No wonder my dad didn't know much. The information I was looking for wasn't available to him, even when he asked. As much as they tried to leave the South behind, they carried relics of it with them into their life in California: in the way they talked, the food they ate, and the way they saw the world. Under the surface lived this world of Southern influence.

My dad continues,

> *It was funny, it was a strange thing. But at the same time there was this sympathetic world right under the surface that was all Southern. There was Southern cooking, people would get together and talk about the past... The kinds of things that they knew about this other world that they lived in. So when they would sit around and reminisce, it was all about this other world. Even though they tried to stay away from it, they brought everything with them.*

Listening to my dad talk about this, I begin to crave these stories. What is lost from their insistence that the past was in the past? I understand why they wouldn't want to speak about these things. There's something very American in that assertion that the past is in the past, unable to reconcile with histories of slavery. Buried in our history books, it is

the insistence that we can all move forward in our own right. That our past does not affect the future, that it doesn't matter after all. We like to bury the terror and trauma that our families lived through. But when we abandon the past for the present, what are we left with?

The history of my mom's family is well-documented. It can be traced back centuries, well before they immigrated to America from Hungary. I know a great deal about my family's lineage on my mom's side. I could tell you where and when they immigrated, where they lived before that, even the names and occupations of the specific family members. But with my dad's family, not only could I not trace the movement of my family from one state to the next, I couldn't even locate them before America. Where did they come from before Louisiana? Africa? Our history, and the history of many African Americans in this country has been erased. Because those who were enslaved were considered property, they were not granted marriage certificates, medical records or census records from which a typical genealogy would be constructed. Pre-Civil War family research for African Americans means sifting through auction records, property ledgers, and bills of sale. A lost cause for many.

Image courtesy of the author

It's no surprise so many African Americans have little connection to their ancestry. During slavery, children were often forcibly removed from their parents, parents were sold to different plantations, and families were forged, not by blood, but through communities. My last name, Carter, was most likely picked up by my ancestors, who were enslaved by a family named Carter. Our name is not our own.

My dad thinks about this differently, seeing ancestry traced in different ways that don't always rely on an oral or written history. Like me, he once believed our history was untraceable. Then my mom got him a DNA kit specifically for African Americans to trace their DNA back to before their ancestors were brought to America.

He explains,

> *Your mother got me this DNA kit. Called African DNA or something like that. I tried it and it's like, all of a sudden, you know that there are links to these different African groups. It made it really fascinating. All of a sudden, here's a concrete thing. It's in your DNA. Generations of slavery didn't wash this away. It's still alive. We grew up as African Americans; we had no connection to the past, really. Except for our families, you know. And to look beyond that was kind of hopeless for a lot of people. We didn't have any idea we could do that. Only some vague idea of Africa. But I remember my father was always talking about, you know, we're Americans. We're not from Africa. We don't know anything about Africa, so people pretending that we do, that's really silly. You can't let people take away your being an American away from you.*

Africa—not just some vague idea, but actual groups of people can be linked to my family's history. We came from somewhere. Not just an entire continent, but actual places and of actual people. We have a history that extends beyond Louisiana. Now we have something that can connect us and it's something concrete. It's in our blood. But it's more than just our DNA. My dad claims he can recognize the legacy and influence Africa has had on his family. He notes the similarities in customs, in ways of making community, in ways of seeing the world. It's all there under the surface. It was futile to try and leave it all behind.

My dad continues,

> *The civil rights movement started in Louisiana. Not just Plessy [v. Ferguson], we can go back to Plessy. But even before that there were newspapers, there were political parties, there were support groups, there were some of those groups that were involved in Mardi Gras and those kinds of things. Those kinds of independent societies that were established to support one another. They're not only some of the oldest in the country, they're very similar to African societies that are developed for the same purposes. When you see people dancing in the Mardi Gras, those are African dances.*

In the early 1990s, a surge of Black films began to be created about Black families going south in pursuit of their roots. In one, *Down in the Delta*, directed by Maya Angelou, a single mother is sent to live with her uncle for the summer to get her life together. She has no job, and is struggling to support her two children, who are cared for in great part by her mother. She is threatened by her family knowledge. If she does not prove to her mother she is willing to care for her family and understand her family's history by the end of the summer, her mother will sell their only lasting family heirloom from the slavery period: a silver candelabra that was sold in exchange for her great-grandfather. In this film, and in many others of this time period, knowing your roots is power. To know where you come from connects you to a broader sense of identity. It brings you back home, it reminds you who you are, and it propels you into the future.

Being a descendent of enslaved people means reconciling in some way with the past of slavery: how it shaped you and how you see your role in today's world. You can't sit back and look at your ancestry as an African American without thinking of struggle and pushing through. There is no other option but to work for a better future.

In the late sixties, African Americans began to re-connect themselves to Africa. This was around the time my father was born. Scholars and artists began to re-connect themselves with the idea of Africa as a homeland. Nina Simone famously fled to Liberia in 1974. What began as a visit to see South African musical legend Miriam Makeba ended in Simone's three year stay. In her memoir *I Put a Spell on You* she writes, "The America I'd dreamed of through the sixties seemed a bad joke now, with Nixon in the White House and the black revolution replaced by disco … Africa, half a world away from New York. Maybe I could find some peace there, or a husband. Maybe it would be like going home."

People like my grandfather pushed back on the idea of Africa as a lost homeland, a homeland to return to. *We're American, not African,* he said. *We don't know anything about Africa.*

My dad continues,

> *There are things that are just there. They're a part of your life. And this was infused in the world that I grew up in, too. Things that are considered for most Westerners inanimate are not considered inanimate for Africans or people from my community. So, like, a tree, or a stone, or whatever it is, they're considered to have some sort of spirit, some sort of intentionality in the world. And that's the way I grew up looking at things. It was almost like people were joking—but they weren't really joking. It's like the way that you treat things in the world and the way that you regard them. You regard them as they are other beings in the world.*

There's a spiritual element, too. A cosmological one. No matter how Christian they were, the way my family saw the world was different, and this was informed by African cosmologies. Many African Americans today take from African spiritualism to inform their day-to-day lives. As a way of connecting to Africa, many African Americans follow Yoruba or other religions derived from Yoruba, a religion stemming from southwest Nigeria. Many Yoruba people were spread across the Atlantic slave trade, and around the world people of the African diaspora practice Yoruba beliefs, which include reincarnation and ancestral guidance in the form of energy and spirits.

> *I realized that there's a whole other world that's informing their existence, but they don't talk about this much. I remember when you were there eating gumbo one day at my mother's house, and people were like, 'Oh, look at that child eating that gumbo. Look at her. Oh, she's an old soul. No one had to teach her. She's been here before. But they're really saying, you know, you've been here before. You're not just new to this world. You've been around. You're a spirit that's been here. That's the way they talk but they're really kind of serious about it. They're looking for these signs of belonging in something like that. The way you eat something. The way you do something. That's what makes you one of us.*

The predetermined cosmological viewpoint, the ancestral guide which leads you toward goodness, which moves in your step… I'm not sure I believe in this type of thing. Reincarnation is a word that sits like a question in my mouth, but I'm drawn to love it if it means belonging.

Back before we came, Grandma cooked gumbo on the stove in Baton Rouge: sassafras, okra, celery stock. She passed away when I was sixteen. At her funeral, I read Psalm 23. It goes like this:

> *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

It's a similar sentiment, God as a spiritual guide. Before I started this, I was having trouble placing myself in my family's history. I was having trouble with the lack of knowledge I had, about who we were, and where we came from. As I continue to learn more about my family's history, I remember these sentiments: to think of your ancestors as guides, and to walk through life in their memory. This much I can take forward. There is an implicit honor in this—this, to me, is legacy. •

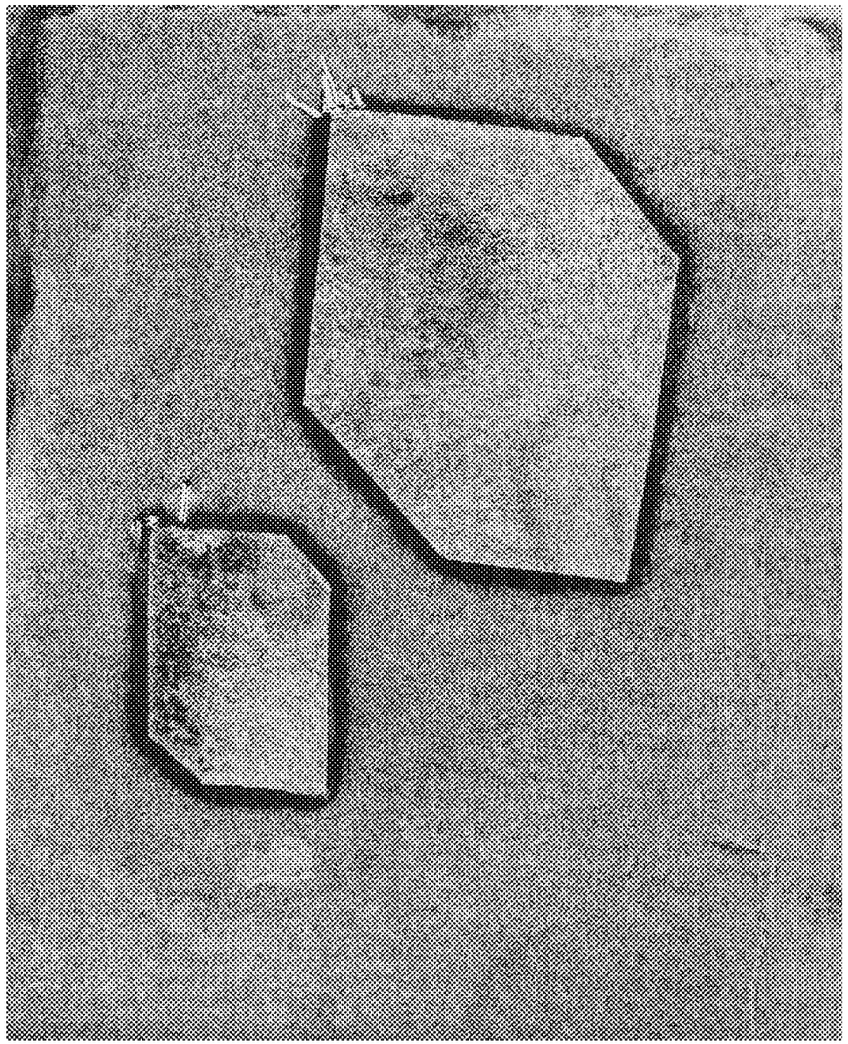


Image by Benjamin Stevens

BEING YOU IS ALSO NOTHING

FRANCESCA MANSKY

Editors' note: This piece contains descriptions of sexual violence.

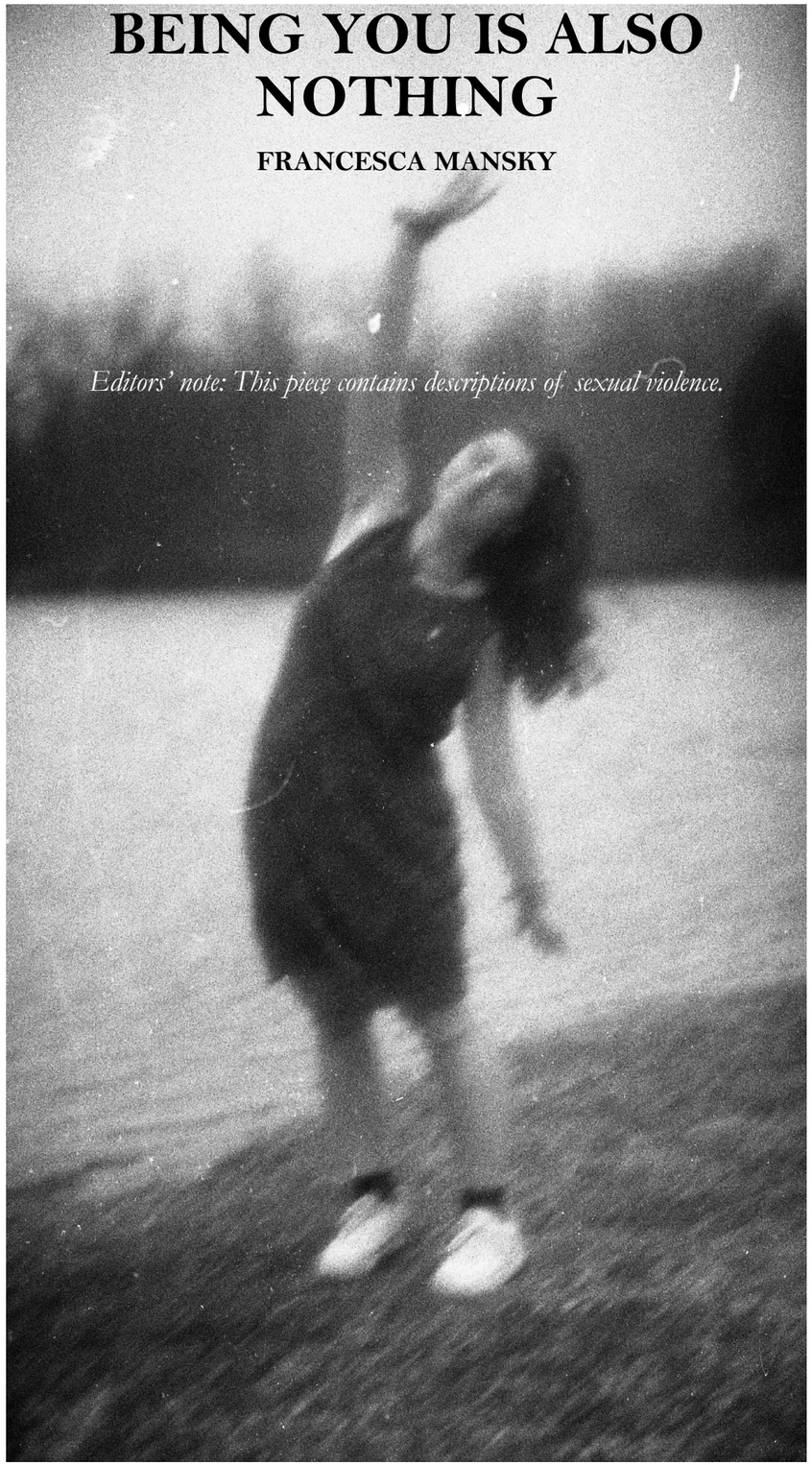


Image by Bridget Conway

July is when, feet pressing against the moss, I tiptoe to the coast. Peripheral sketches of trees on the horizon line, Prussian blue fractals sway with the wind. The reeds are sharp and I'm bleeding from my feet when they slip through the water. My skin seems to melt off my arms and legs with the sunscreen, and I smell like grease. The cool water laps at my calves and takes the sunscreen with it. Kaleidoscope oil spinning away from me, the surface of the water is repelled by my body. I would also like to spin away from my body but I don't because lunch is almost ready.

I feel like a plucked goose, covered in oil and baking in the sun and melting and rotating slowly. I can't stand the smell of myself, and I can't stand the feeling of myself against myself. The feeling is hairy and greasy and hot. The sun is everywhere: on the water, on the grass, on my hair.

I have watched a seal all day—a seal which looks like a black sea bird. Maybe it is a bird. Sometimes it dips below the surface with a splash, and the water around it flips like a deck of cards switching hands. A pair of white gulls sew themselves against the tree line farther and farther until they are sky. I call my sister to see the seal, and she sees its black, oil slick head. It flies away, turning to sky as well. My sister and I are hovering too, sunspots above the dew covered grass.

We blink at each other and return to our bodies. Her body tells me everything and nothing. She is fourteen. She is hiding, she is hypervisible. (Helena crying, Helena slamming her bedroom door, *Helena, what's up?* Helena: *Nothing!*, Helena covers herself, Helena: *Don't look!* Helena crying.)

I watch my sister yelling at my parents and getting yelled at by my parents and am disgusted and ashamed of myself (my mother assures me: I was much worse). The hormones in my body at fourteen seemed to manifest in about a million screaming cells which I wish I could retroactively have told to be quiet. To pat each fourteen-year-old Francesca cell and say, *It's okay, what happened to you is okay, being you is hard, but being you is also nothing.* But I can't because those cells died and made way for new, slightly less angry cells, or slightly-better-at-hiding-it cells. Some of my cells are still angry, swollen, yelling. I can feel them fuming after eight years. I can also hear some of them crying. But all of Helena's cells are screaming and red. I want to shhh them. At the same time, in the moments after she slams her bedroom door, I want to turn into a bird, and carry her off to a mountain, and take her away from her body and the bodies of others. And maybe feed her worms and nest together.

My body is marked by time, and by moments which have torn that time away from me. These moments hurled through my history at lightning speed and destroyed my timeline. Things obviously from my childhood lodged themselves into last week, breakfast was a year ago, and explanations don't paint the picture of this wobbling, unreliable record which sits smugly in my mind.

Pockmarks in the body of my life, as I run my hands along this body, they get caught against the scars and impression lines of moments which still won't heal. I have a horrible memory, made worse by my constant assertion that I have a horrible memory. But unlike everything else, these marks won't fade as years go by. Instead they deepen and discolor with exposure to the sun. I don't really know what happened, because I can't remember, and I am alone with this non-memory. But with each day the non-memory etches wider, lower. Sunlight taps mirror and I try to catch this reflected light onto my sister's body. Where are her marks? What are her non-memories?

I want to see my sister as her own person. Or I want to want to see my sister as her own person, but she progresses through my timeline with a five-year delay. I am in a constant state of wondering which pockmarks her body has stopped at and skipped like a CD, repeating words that don't make sense. Which non-memories do her fingers draw circles around like the water in the drain in the sink, like the sunscreen on the surface of the lake?

I have watched her grow from tiny tiny small to small to big small, and all the tweenage yelling in my house are fights I've had with my mother on opposite sides of a wall. I sit on the couch downstairs and hear Helena slam the door to her room, and I am on my bed sobbing again, my hand shaking from the force exerted to shut myself back into my space. Wailing, shaking, careening back into myself. I am telling a stranger something on Omegle, I am thirteen, I am writing FUCK YOU very small on the wall, I am scratching my arm, I am squeezing out a bottle of toothpaste into the sink. Breathing deeply, I am back on the water with Helena.

We squint at the bay together and a cat that lives in the house pads between us. He is fat and orange and hot from the sun.

"Sweet cat," Helena says, stroking his fur. The cat is purring against her palm. He must be a time travelly cat because it's August now and I'm in an air-conditioned apartment in Carroll Gardens, sitting with a man who has told me he is getting back with his ex-girlfriend within the week.

I am looking at him, and he is looking down at my legs, and my hand is on his thigh, and his words are not really making sense.

"But I think we should enjoy this time we have together."

I am nineteen years old, but five years ago I was fourteen. And two years ago I was a virgin, and ten years ago I was nine and he was grown already. His hand feels like a baseball mitt rubbing my thigh, and he's looking at my breasts and saying we should enjoy this time together because we'll know each other for a long time probably, he thinks, because I'm very special and not necessarily less wise than his ex-girlfriend. He says she is as wise as me, even though she is twenty-nine. I wonder, honestly, if there's a chance she's just as stupid.

I get a cup of water for him and make a joke about poisoning it, and we laugh together. And then I say *just kidding* and then I make a joke about killing his parents and we laugh together again.

I am silent sitting next to him on the bed as he strokes my hair. His dick is growing in my hand, and even as I say, "I'm sad, this hurts me," and he says "I know, I know," (which are words of understanding) he becomes harder and harder, as he humps my palm. "I don't want to yet," I say, when he rubs his boner on my hip bone. He sighs, "fair enough." But his face says *no fair* and his exhale also says *no fair*. But it's no fair to me because he was so nice and he holds me with his big hands which also handle money and grown-up things and that means I'm also a grown-up thing. When he lets go of my body and sulks at the end of the bed, I am a kid again, and I want my mom. And I want to kill him.

I blink back to July, back to Maine, back-to-back with my sister on the sharp grass. She faces towards the house and I am looking at the water, at the seal or the bird. The cat rubs against me, then my sister, then me and is very fat and is stuck in time circling us. I try not to take it personally that Helena shaves now. We are both closing our eyes although I cannot see her face, and I wonder what she thinks has happened in my past, and if she links it to her future too. Is that ridiculous? Is this my OCD? These questions are not specific to Maine or to July. They may not even be specific to me.

Helena does not talk much in this story because I can't remember what she said in Maine, in July, and it would feel like a lie if I fluffed this up with dialogue from my sister (like when I lied about her saying "Sweet cat" even though she probably did say that at some point while we were around him, but I just don't remember.) Helena laughs often and rolls her eyes just as often.

Sometimes, I look at her and all I feel is pain; all the time I look at her and all I feel is love. Because I was inundated with pain as a fourteen-year-old that tangled up in my genes and sat there and sunk into my body like Spider-Man venom when he gets bitten by the spider. When my powers manifested, though, I could not shoot cum out of my hands and swing from things or kiss women upside down. Instead I could cry in a chair for an hour in front of my silent psychiatrist, and I couldn't go on the subway sometimes, and I could tell women, "I know what you feel," when they told me terrible stories. These were all powers that hurt and made me better and made me worse.

April kisses Brooklyn, and I have landed back in New York because of a breakdown at school. I am sulking around my house like a ghost, a shadow of the girl who grew up here before. My nuclear family bounces around me, with their jobs and school obligations. I float, I spin. On Sunday night, my sister is sobbing in her room and my mother is texting me. She thinks, "I'm bad at being a mum." Blasphemy! Because it's blasphemous. How could she control the storms which raged unrelenting against the windows of her daughters? My sister makes me scared to have kids because she is difficult (again, less difficult than I was) but my mother says I owe her grandchildren.

Helena skips school the next day because she is unprepared for her tests and is very disorganized. I tell her it is "very bad" to skip school, although I'm a nine-hour bus ride away from school, which I am skipping, whereas she is only twelve stops on the Q away from school. We go to coffee and breakfast and Mum texts us yelling *THIS TIME IS FOR STUDYING! NOT FOR HANGING OUT!*

We drink our coffee and laugh about being in ninth grade and fourteenth grade, respectively, and our funny and loving mum, and which Kardashian each member of our family would be, and how embarrassing it is to be alive.

I try and help her study for her history test, and I casually mention I am writing about her in a piece I'm submitting for a campus publication.

"Me? Is it bad?"

Is it bad?

Is it bad?

No. It's not bad.

I get dinner with my grandma that night; we are kindred spirits because we both have mood disorders. The air is so warm and the light in the restaurant is yellow and

we are sitting by the windows at the front. Young couples and old ladies sit around us; their conversations marinate into a soupy white noise humming, spiraling around me and my grandma.

I tell her I don't want to talk about college because it's painful, and she says that she also hated college when she went in the sixties although she, too, doesn't want to talk about it. We both have a glass of red wine (our preference), and my grandma looks at me and starts to cry because we are the same. She wants to see me as my own person. But I'm circling and skipping around her timeline with a fifty-six-year delay. I pat her frail arm under the layers of black clothes she wears as if she's in mourning.

"How's your sister?"

"She's okay. She's anxious, she's difficult, but she's okay."

I am trying to talk about my sister, but I am really just talking about me. My words circle the drain: *me, my sister, me, my sister, me, me, me*. I have pain linked to growing older, and I watch as my sister grows older everyday. I think I've forgotten that I do too, because circling drains has made me dizzy, and tracing memories has made me exhausted.

Me and my sister, my sister and I sit back-to-back on the grass in front of the receding hairline which is the water licking the shore. My sister journals because of me, and that is an undeniably beautiful gift I have given her.

It's quiet now between us, although our cells are screaming and yelling and singing and crying and slamming the doors. I don't know what she's thinking so I open my eyes and look up. I can't describe the sky at 8:00 PM, pink against the coniferous trees, blue against the floating mist, orange against the stripped brown bark, the gray shingles of the roof. White against my wishes, it rains. •

Image by Amanda Poorvu

ON-GOING

A TRANSLATION OF "HINGEGEND" BY ANNE DUDEN

ELIZABETH YEARSLEY

Translator's Note:
The German title for this poem is a made-up almost-word. "Hingegend:" a combination of hingehen (to go), hingegen (however), gegen (against), and gegend (area, region). Duden plays with her words; she experiments with nearly-neologisms, puns with compound nouns, and wrangles adjectives into nominalizations. Each stanza describes movement that it is somehow static, isolated to the landscape it both clutters and animates.

In "Hingegend," Duden articulates a journey and renders the particular places she encounters, honoring the bucolic and the urban, the idyllic and the deadly. To communicate the mass of her words, which are often as condensed and inventive as the title, I need to make space for meanings to accumulate in other ways. I've done so with dashes, which break words apart where Duden pushes them together, but I've found that my attempts to open up these words do just as much to link them together. My hope is that these dashes, like Duden's poem, probe the bridges and breaks between solid and liquid, earth-bound and flying, gone and ongoing.

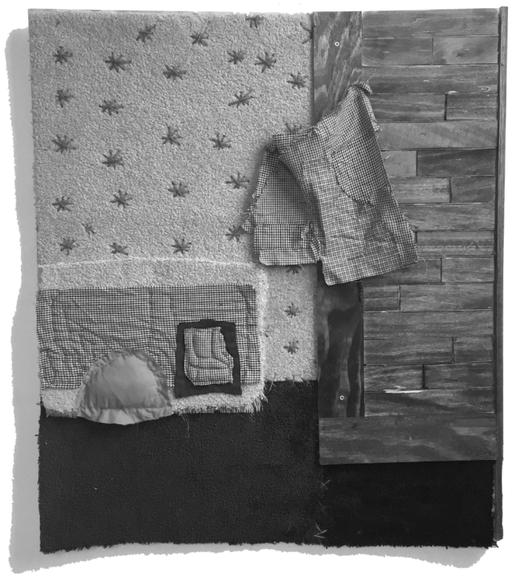


Image by Haley Johnson

Hundsrosen ins eigene Gebein gelegt
Heckenseide gezogen über die Augen
der Gezeitenfrucht Kind.
Entlang zwangseingewiesener Luftholer
wütet das Hirn in Schüben
und blutet zur Seite
stromtote Ableger
ins süße Faulen der Nebenarme
Robinien- und Pappelgestöber.
Rauhreife Blickabsteige
schneeiger Roggen
Hoch-, Hitzegesirr.
Hopfenschnellen am Regen
lächeln sich zu Boden.

Briar roses split a splinted foot
hedgerow silk pulled over eyes
of a tide-fruit child.
Beside forced to fish-breathe breath-getters
the brain rages in waves
and bleeds to the side
electric-dead offshoots
find the sweet rotting of estuaries
locust and cottonwood flurries.
Frost hostage
snowy rye sight
high-, heat-hum.
Hops spring at rain
smirk themselves to ground.

Ichausweser
gasgesamt
um die Dome getrieben
der Worte verwiesen
tropfenweise verflüssigt
Ins Rührei geschwemmt.

Ex-I-led
gas-gathered
caught near domes by tides
pulled away by words
liquid now by drops
egg-scramble wash-up.

Auf- und Unterwühlhalde Precinct
Ab-Ahnhof Hannover.
Hier sagten Bäume
zwei Sprechboten
gegen das Licht.

Over-churned piled-under "precinct"
de-part de-scend Hannover.
Trees spoke here
two messengers
up against the light.

Unter Autorücken aus Zu- und Abschlagstoffen
Tiefgang durchs weggetretene Meer
beim unaufhörlichen Wachsen der Stockwerke
weiter absinkend.
Im Grunde
nötigt sich eine Musikzeile auf.
Und Baumkronen
zerfleddert in anderthalb Sätzen.

Under carbacks of add- and de-ductives
keel through the stepped away sea
with neverstopping floor-growing
sinking still.
At bottom
a line of music suggests its lack.
And tree crowns
turn ragged in few and a half phrases.

Um das: gehöhter Augenblick
Sturm und Verdurstung.
Wippgang ins Nervengebüsch
Laub abgekämpfter Eschen.

For this: heard-over moment
storm and thirst-death.
Teetering to headgerows
foliage of battle-weary ashes.

Schluchzen Sie nicht.
Lassen Sie hängen
das Abgesparte vom Mund.
Ich gehe jetzt
– alles Vorgefundene
hinter öffentlich verschlossenen Lippen –
in die Wahrnehmung
Hingegend um Nienburg
auf den von oben schon überfahrenen Landstrich
schnell abgeblickte Schönseite.
Denn zeitgleich und überall
auf ihren Tod getroffen
geschleudert
gefetzt
geklatscht.
Im Strecksprung Flug Watschelgang
dabei eigens noch gegengestachelt –gebuckelt
-geballt.

No sobbing, you.
Save up to let fall
the sectioned-off part from the mouth.
I'll go now
- everything before-found
behind openly closed up lips -
in becoming aware
on going around Nienburg
from the above already run over stretch of land
quickly unlooked at attractions.
Since just now and everywhere
run up against their death
bedraggled
beaten
begone.
In duckfooted handspring flight
once again buckled- bent-
balled-against.

Großer Eisvogel nun
geschwänt hinter Lidern
Gestalt unter Tag
der Gebeinfreien
der Gehör- und Gehäuslosen.

Giant icebird soon
swanned behind eyelids
shape beneath day
of the bonefree
of the hear- and house-less.

Einem ausgeweinten König
abends ins Nest gelegt
Eulen-Plumeaus
darunter schwerhöriges Wimmern
kleiner Organansammlungen.

For a wept away king
evenings laid into its nest
osprey duvet
thereunder hardly-hearing thrums
tiny organ murmurations.

Stellen Sie sich baldmöglichst ruhig.
Nun entschlafen Sie endlich.

Set yourself still as soon as you can.
You outsleep yourself already. •

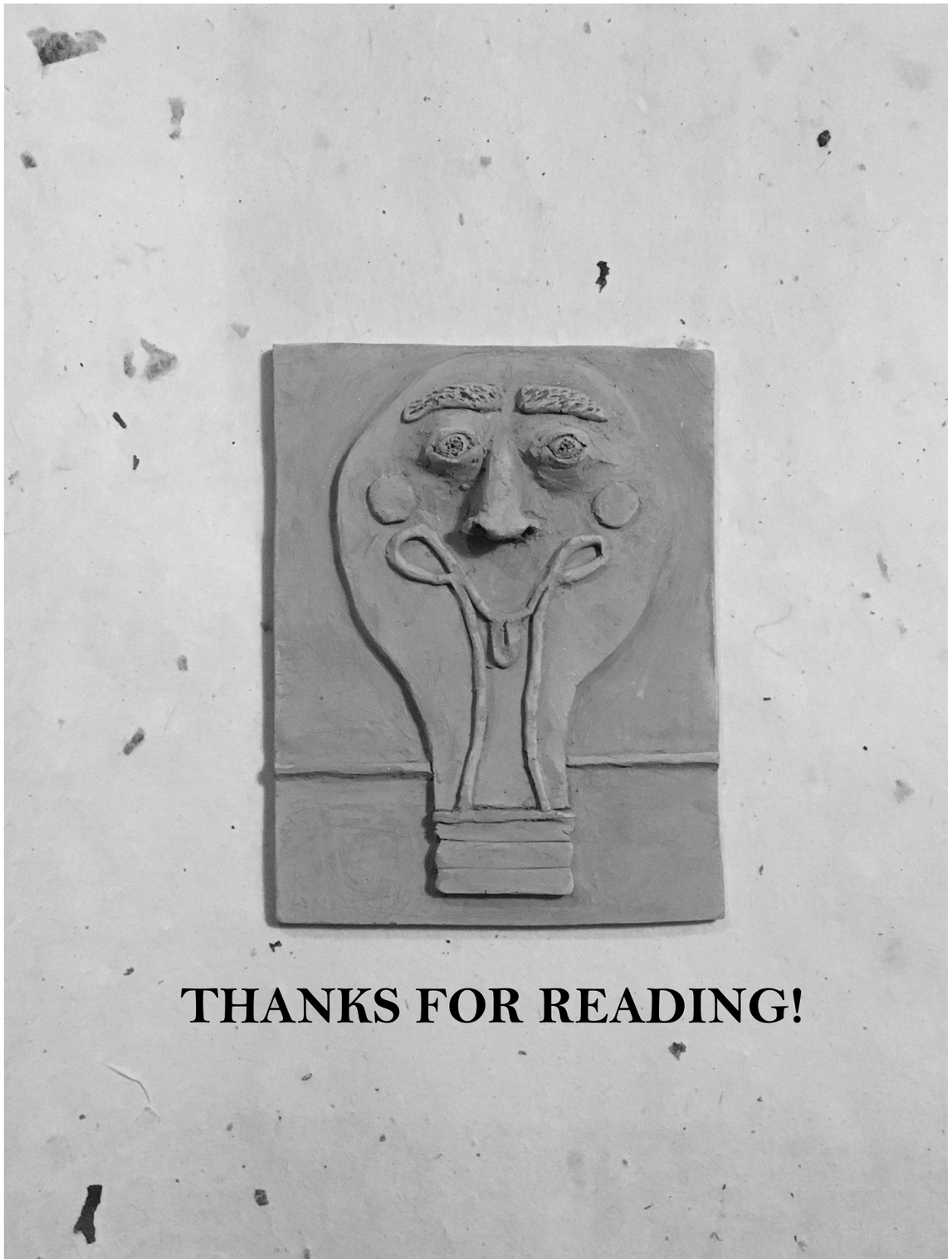
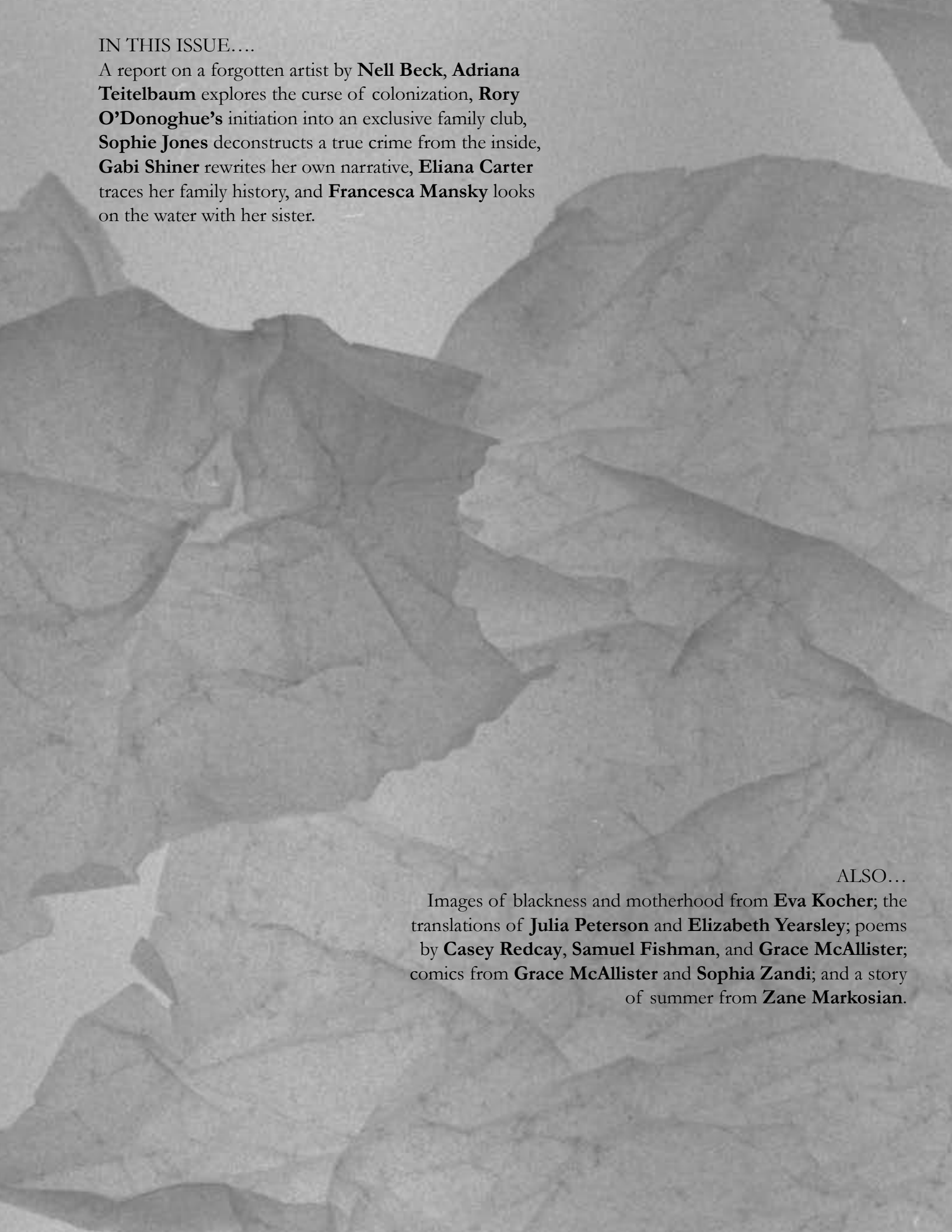


Image by Molly Sheffield

IN THIS ISSUE….

A report on a forgotten artist by **Nell Beck**, **Adriana Teitelbaum** explores the curse of colonization, **Rory O'Donoghue's** initiation into an exclusive family club, **Sophie Jones** deconstructs a true crime from the inside, **Gabi Shiner** rewrites her own narrative, **Eliana Carter** traces her family history, and **Francesca Mansky** looks on the water with her sister.



ALSO…

Images of blackness and motherhood from **Eva Kocher**; the translations of **Julia Peterson** and **Elizabeth Yearsley**; poems by **Casey Redcay**, **Samuel Fishman**, and **Grace McAllister**; comics from **Grace McAllister** and **Sophia Zandi**; and a story of summer from **Zane Markosian**.